When We Weep

Cyndi Bayless Overstreet

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When We Weep

(14th Century)

"This is a word I never thought I'd hear myself utter in conjunction with you, Nicholas. S*hameless."* LaCroix's eyes passed with disapproval over his brightly-clad physique, the slim-fit short tunic, the skin-tight bicolor hose that left nothing to the imagination. "You've appeared in the streets attired, thus?"

The young vampire laughed and sprang through the door into their suite. He grinned and tilted his fuchsia plumed-cap to a cocky angle. "Venice is exhilarating!"

LaCroix frowned. "You're frolicking with that pack of young Venetians, aren't you?"

"La Compagna della Calza!"

"Street performers." He shook his head and again appraised the flagrant attire. Stockings so constrictive they revealed every contour of the young man's muscular legs, rounded buttocks and crotch. "You've nothing to lose save your dignity, but I'm forced to question whether or not your mortal companions are endangering their reproductive capabilities with these outlandishly tight costumes."

"It isn't a costume; it's current style."

"These young men have scandalized half of Italy."

"Italy scandalizes herself," he announced with a chuckle, his blue eyes glimmering. "I had no idea ladies of refinement could respond so brazenly. In the *calle,* just now, I was actually seized by a noblewoman."

"Need I inquire what region of your anatomy suffered this indignity?"

Nicholas grinned.

LaCroix shook his head. "You will discover as the centuries pass that fads of fashion peak and wane, but refinement and taste are eternal. It is easy to discern the suitability of a tunic cut in long lines that flatter the body, and even more so, the appropriateness of stockings dyed a *single* hue." His eyes passed over the hose - one leg fuchsia, the other chartreuse - and cringed.

"So now you're my fashion consultant." He winked and doffed his cap with a regal bow, revealing the silken locks of his hair shaved bald on one side.

The master vampire rolled his eyes. "Adolescence is a disease for which there is no cure."

"We're performing tonight on the steps of Saint Mark's, *jongleuring,* and tomorrow night we're performing an opera."

"You would fare far better if you spent your time developing contacts among the more prestigious silk merchants of Venice. We're attending the Fair of St. Jean in two months, and such relationships can prove invaluable. If I recall correctly, you expressed an interest in possibly securing a profitable *commenda* with one of the wealthier families."

"Come watch us perform!" Ignoring the admonishment, he seized LaCroix's arm and compelled him toward the door. "Where's Janette?"

"Hiding, no doubt. Such spectacles are beneath you."

"We're really quite good," he coaxed, his eyes twinkling.

"Is that why your motley crew is being denounced from the pulpits as immoral and indecent corrupters of Italy's youth?"

"All the more reason to watch us perform." He winked. "Mario was actually spat upon in the street two nights ago."

"Obviously this is a source of great pride to you."

"It's positively intoxicating!" The young vampire beamed.

"Inciting public outrage, making a spectacle of yourself, peddling your private attributes for indiscriminate display." LaCroix's eyes passed over him. "I've taught you better than this, Nicholas. This is not our way."

"These are modern times, LaCroix. Some are calling it the dawn of a renaissance." With a theatrical flourish, he replaced his plumed-cap to its cocky angle atop his head. "Times change and we must change with them."

The master vampire opened his mouth to respond, but with a flamboyant and agile flip the youth sprang out the door and disappeared...

OOOOO

"Is he gone?" Janette stuck her head into the room from the seclusion of her boudoir.

LaCroix nodded.

"Roaming the *calli* night after night like a bohemian." She pursed her lips with indignation. "Who knows where he's been sleeping."

"It's apparent where he's *not* sleeping." The master vampire's eyes glimmered with amusement at her expense.

"And *won't* be," she retorted with an arrogant tilt to her chin. "Have you seen his hair?"

"More appropriately put: the-lack-there-of. Indeed I have." He drifted to the woman's side, lightly took her arm. "It is safe to assume such insanity is fleeting. After all, it can hardly be inherited, he is my creation."

A smile gently graced her lips. "That costume, such flagrant display of his anatomy."

"Attributes you never thought you'd be forced to share with the public."

"He's begging for trouble." A grin teased her lips and her eyes twinkled with mischief. "Some woman will be more than willing to give it to him."

OOOOO

She watched him from the crowd as he skillfully tossed a series of plates into the air and gracefully caught them in his hands. His pale hair peeked beneath his cap, caught the light and glowed, a golden silhouette among the sea of raven-haired youths surrounding him.

Intrigued, she moved near, but the throngs of human flesh threatened her advance. A woman jostled in front of her; the woman's hat, embellished by an ostentatious array of feathers, blocked the view.

She wove tightly into the crowd and maneuvered next to the woman, attempted to squeeze past; but the hat-lady wouldn't give. She strained to catch a glimpse of the handsome young man with the cherubic cheeks and the brilliant attire, but failed. All she could discern was the hint of a fuchsia cap surrounded by a colorful array of similar hats in a multitude of hues. The hat-lady wouldn't budge.

Discreetly, she lifted her foot and firmly planted the heel of her shoe into the top of the woman's foot...

Applause roared, swallowed the wail of pain that cut the air, and the view miraculously cleared.

The young woman smiled.

OOOOO

"Niccolo never requires a break." Mario sank to the steps of the church beneath the massive display of the Four Bronze Horses of Saint Mark's that graced the main entrance, and mopped his brow. "He will have us all worn to a frazzle before the night is through."

"For such a sickly looking fellow he's strong as an ox and hardy, too." Giovan sank down beside him and shifted his considerable brawn against the facade of the church. "He can actually lift me."

Mario's dark eyes widened. "A scaffold couldn't hoist you."

Laughter rumbled through the group of eight young men who began to gather on the steps. The plumes atop their heads fluttered in a rainbow of color against the night.

Giovan's laughter rose the loudest. "Well, Niccolo can."

"My guess is the bum sleeps all day and revels all night." Mario snatched Giovan's purple cap and tossed it toward the object of their discussion who caught it smoothly in his hand and scaled the steps to join them.

"Get a job, you gypsy." Mario retrieved the cap from Nicholas' grasp. "You can work with me during the day renovating this place." He slapped his hand against the church's facade. "We're ushering this Byzantine edifice into the dawn of a modern era, and my brother's associated with the guild responsible for gilding and gold-leaf."

"They actually trust you near gold?" Nicholas slapped his shoulder and sank to the step at his side. "Mop buckets are more likely."

"If you keep this up, Mario, you might accidentally be mistaken for a responsible citizen." The quip came from a regal young man with classically chiseled features and intense violet eyes named Montague. He slipped next to Nicholas, sat, and reclined with casual ease against his shoulder. "Our friend, Niccolo, possesses much loftier goals than mopping up after your brother. He fancies himself a prospective silk merchant."

This prompted a chorus of jesting gasps of wonder from the group.

"In that case," Mario added. "You would do well to court the attentions of the del Fiore family. *Signore* Francisco is growing old, and with no sons to follow in his footsteps, it is rumored he would be amenable

to acquiring a young, hearty partner; one strong enough to hoist Giovan." He jabbed his finger into the muscular man's ribs, and Giovan jabbed back almost sending the slender Mario rolling down the steps.

Giovan caught his companion and steadied him just in time, gave him an affectionate pat on the head. "It's a matter of public debate whether or not Francisco del Fiore is son-less." The large man's eyes twinkled with laughter and they lit upon Montague still draped against Nicholas. "You're a friend of the family, if I'm not mistaken. What's your opinion?"

"Friend!" Montague's eyes grew round. "Last time I encountered the fiend he pursued me with a whip. Funny how that annoying little detail slipped your mind."

"Isn't it?" Giovan burst into laughter. "Perhaps you could refresh my memory; what were the details of your adventures in the rose garden with *Signorina* Bianca del Fiore?"

Montague opened his mouth to respond. Shut it. Grinned. "I would gladly accept another lashing."

"You might just get one, too, if you continue pursuing the man's daughter. A rouge and a vagabond like you will never stand a chance of proving himself worthy of such a breathtaking creature as Bianca del Fiore. Her sister on the other hand..." Giovan winked. "*Signore* Francisco might just be willing to offer you a full partnership just to take her off his hands."

"Nay, I'd rather have the lashing."

The group roared with laughter and Montague found himself pelted beneath a rain of feathered-caps. Fuchsia, purple, scarlet and chartreuse, they soared into the night air and showered down upon him.

Mario lunged for the cap atop Montague's head, but was smoothly evaded. Determined to achieve his goal he pursued Montague, snatched the yellow plume and yanked. The hat came free followed by a cascade of glossy black hair that tumbled past the young man's shoulders in a wave of curls.

"He's got hair!" The group gasped in unison.

"On both sides of his head," someone shouted. "Attack!"

OOOOO

A pair of violet-blue eyes caught Nicholas' gaze, held it. Montague cast him a clandestine smile along with a series of plates that Nicholas skillfully caught and sent sailing back to the glee of a roaring crowd.

Montague still possessed his luxuriant mane, thanks to Nicholas' intervention. He'd managed to convince his companions that an essential element of individualism was missing from their ranks; Montague could embody that element.

They laughed, dubbed Nicholas, "The philosopher"; Montague, "The dandy-fop," and scurried back into the street, leaping and tumbling with a burst of renewed energy; a colorful array of agile young men whose cares were quickly swallowed by the adoration of strangers.

A burst of applause roared over his senses and Nicholas closed his eyes, relished the moment...

The voices of his "friends" drifted through the night air, jesting and bantering. Carried on the wind, the voices rose around him, filled his thoughts with camaraderie. His companions accepted him without question, his pale luminescent skin, his nocturnal restraints; he was one of their own, embraced whole-heartedly by these exuberant innocents, almost as if...

He was mortal.

The thought gave him a jolt and he opened his eyes in time to see Montague fly past executing a flawless cartwheel.

Poised with regal ease before the crowd, Montague swept his yellow cap from his head and bowed. Freed from its constraints, the curls of dissension flowed with a life of their own past his shoulders; their darkness absorbed the light.

The crowd went wild, startling the young man. Women cheered, to the chagrin of their male companions, and began to throw coins and articles of jewelry.

Montague gasped and looked back to his companions for support; they, equally amazed, urged him on.

His pale cheeks bloomed beneath the unrestrained adoration of the women, and he pulled himself up to his lofty height, tossed his head and languished in the waves of applause that passed over him.

"Niccolo," the hiss came from behind and Nicholas turned.

"Our dandy-fop has stolen the moment." Mario's dark eyes glimmered with amusement as they lit upon their companion, sans his yellow cap, his luxuriant locks aglow beneath the light that whispered over the *Piazza San Marco*. Mario laughed as an article of clothing sailed through the air and landed at Montague's feet, followed by another piece of jewelry. "You were right; *'an essential element of individualism'* was exactly what our group needed." He stooped, retrieved a ruby ring and beamed.

Montague glowed beneath the brazen onslaught of ladies' silk and lace finery, he turned, caught Nicholas' eye and grinned.

Stark against the darkness, the pale vampire winked.

OOOOO

He caught sight of her across the *piazza*, a whisper of loveliness shimmering in the dark, and his voice froze in his throat. She drifted gracefully through the crowd; a young man trailed in her wake, his hair worn in a common page, his attire unremarkable, bespeaking that of a servant rather than a suitable escort for a lady of such refinement.

"Sing, Niccolo, you're supposed to be carrying the melody." A sharp jab in the ribs drew his attention. He turned and looked down at the short fellow in a chartreuse cap who offered him an infectious smile. Orlando. "Dreaming?" the fellow quipped.

"Indeed," he breathed and resumed the harmony of their *madrigal* with new found enthusiasm.

Nicholas had sensed an intense pair of eyes upon him for several nights in a row, but though he'd scanned the crowds, no presence caught his attention — until tonight...

Her beauty burned itself into his mind. The pale yellow glow of her hair, her nimble form draped in silk, the intensity of her deep-green eyes as they gazed toward the performers.

"Caught sight of a lovely?" Orlando's exquisite baritone wove the question into the final stanza of their tune as it wafted into the air. "*Beware the bug, for once it's bitten, doomed is the young man's heart whose smitten.*"

He turned from Orlando's knowing smirk and once more scanned the crowd, but his search was in vain.

The vision had vanished.

OOOOO

"Why do you never drink with us, Niccolo?"

The question swam in his head as the night wore on. In the stardust hours, long after the crowds dissipated, the group would drink itself into oblivion, pass out on the lawn of *Piazza San Marco*, a multi-colored collage of brilliantly clad bodies, piled one upon another, limbs tangled in a mound of bliss, and sleep till dawn.

Alcohol, in its purest form, was an anathema to his system, but blended within the proper medium, the flask of blood concealed in his tunic, absorption would be assured. LaCroix warned him the results were unpredictable, and Nicholas had never attempted such a ruse, but the desire to belong overshadowed consequence and he found himself in blissful slumber at the bottom of a pack of inebriated mortals.

"Niccolo?" A voice invaded his delirium. "We've done a limb count and Monty's missing."

He untangled himself, blinked and looked into Mario's face. "What?"

"The rogue's exploits will merit him a lashing in the least, but more likely than that, a slit throat. He's wandered off toward the canal."

"Why are you telling me?"

"We drew lots and you've been chosen to go after him."

"Lots?" He blinked in confusion and sat up.

"Yea, you remember." Amusement swam in his red-rimmed eyes, cheeks flushed as scarlet as the cap askew atop his head. "Besides, our dandy-fop is your responsibility now."

"I missed the election." Surrendering to the inevitable, he stumbled to his feet.

"Nay, no election." Mario buried himself in the pack and drifted back to sleep, mumbling, "It was a coronation."

OOOOO

The gondola draped in silk and moonlight sat at the water's edge. Nicholas could sense the mortal's presence within so he moved near. Gentle sounds drifted through the darkness, all too human sounds, and he hesitated.

Montague was not alone.

Decorum said retreat, but curiosity and the alcohol burning through his blood compelled him closer. He whisked into the shadows, spirited near, parted the silk...

Moonlight caressed the entwined form of supple shadows in the dim. A hint of milk-white flesh caught the light as a pair of hands urged satin and lace aside, revealed a shapely thigh. Montague compelled his companion into a cascade of pillows and sought her lips. Her fingers twined into his hair, caressed the locks that fell in a veil over their impassioned forms.

The woman moaned and arched into his embrace. Her nails raked his back, pulled him down to cover her body. A pale whisper of flaxen hair spread across the pillows, wove into the raven locks of the man whose body strained to claim hers...

An intoxicating blend of blood and musk rose into the air, flared Nicholas' nostrils and stirred the beast. His head began to swim as impassioned moans enticed his senses. Mortal lust, base, in its purest form was raw yet strangely...innocent.

He tore his eyes from the sight, shook his head to clear it. Alcohol inflamed the blood of his earlier repast, burned through his veins and clouded his judgment. The woman's sighs drew the primal urge to claim...to feed.

The young mortals writhed in their embrace; his hands strained through folds of fabric to push her skirt upward. Her shapely legs wound around his waist, urged final consummation...

...And spawned Nicholas' arousal.

The beast roared within; it overwhelmed reason and the vampire slipped from the shadows, eyes blazing amber in the dim...

Montague turned. His eyes widened.

Blood and lust permeated the air. Nicholas fought for reason, failed and hissed at his young friend, fangs bared.

"*Niccolo, no!*" Montague threw himself over his companion and shielded her from the horror. Confused and shaken, she buried her face in his chest and began to weep.

Struck cold by their terror; Montague's stricken image and his vulnerability as he attempted to protect the young woman from almost certain death, froze the vampire where he stood. Reason fought the blood-lust and shame rose to claim it. A look of shock replaced the visage of death and Nicholas turned to flee, stumbled from the gondola and onto the lawn where he collapsed in a wave of self-loathing.

OOOOO

My foolish, reckless child, a familiar voice swam through his mind. *I warned you of the folly of such associations.*

Nicholas buried his face into the grass and fought to quell the voice, the truth...

LaCroix was right. There was no place for him among these mortals. They were endangered by his very presence.

"Niccolo?"

A hand touched his shoulder and he gave a start. In his misery the mortal had actually caught him unaware. He turned and fell into Montague's violet gaze.

"Are you all right?" the young man asked.

"I must leave." His voice sounded distant to his ears.

"What are you talking about?" Concern clouded Montague's eyes.

"I can't stay here anymore. I'm...sorry, believe me, I know it was foolish..." Words escaped him and he turned away.

"Leave? Don't be ridiculous." Montague knelled on the grass where the young vampire lay sprawled and placed his hand upon his shoulder. "Are you feeling all right? You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"You don't *understand*, I must leave. I can't stay here any longer." He started to rise, but dizziness claimed him and he faltered.

"Blessed Mary, you gave me the fright of my life. Those *eyes*."

Nicholas cringed; the mortal had actually seen him. He had to get away. No mortal that witnessed such a thing could be permitted to live. If the others found out...

"It's all right, she didn't see you." He gripped Nicholas' shoulder and held tight. "Everything's going to be all right."

Confusion wracked his brain. Montague had come within a whisper of certain death, yet he sought to console the very specter of that death. How close, how foolishly close Nicholas had come to actually believing he could share in the lives of these humans.

Shamed by Montague's concern, he ripped free from his touch, "You have no idea what I almost did," he hissed. "Leave me." Even now the blood-lust lingered; enticed by the musk of the young mortal's sweat, it taunted the vampire's senses.

"We all make mistakes, especially when we've been drinking." Montague grinned and flopped to the ground beside him. "I should know, I've had a bit too much of the ale tonight, myself. If you hadn't interrupted our little interlude when you did, I probably would have ended my escapade on a down note and embarrassed myself. So I guess I owe you a favor; at least this way she'll talk to me again."

He looked deeply into Montague's face and realized the young man was more than a little inebriated.

He offered Nicholas a lopsided grin. "Breathtaking, wasn't she, and well worth the risk. I've no objection to you watching, but I draw the line when you try to claim her."

He shook his head to clear it, confused by the whirlwind of events. He opened his mouth to reply that he hadn't really seen the lady in question beyond his indiscriminate view of her silken thighs wrapped around Montague's waist, when suddenly, his senses perceived a second mortal and he turned toward the source.

"*Where the hell is she?*"

A presence stalked from the shadows and confronted Montague. A diminutive young man with unremarkable features, his hair cropped in a common page; he glared down at them, his eyes filled with anger. Nicholas recognized him as the young man he'd seen trailing in the wake of the enticing beauty he caught sight of days before. He was short, but what he lacked in stature he reclaimed in brash; young, less man than boy, he rolled forward onto the balls of his feet and prepared to confront Montague with physical violence if his question wasn't answered.

Montague's face hardened and he snapped, "I summoned you here to escort her home, not to fight a duel. She's had a terrible fright; see that she gets home safely."

"The two of you pant after each other like dogs. If you'd stay away these things wouldn't happen."

"Go!"

"Mark my words, Francisco will have your throat if he has to hire someone to do it, and before you're through with her, he'll be forced to buy Bianca's way into a respectable marriage."

"Take her, damn it; she's in the gondola."

The boy's body went rigid with fury as he weighed his decision. His moss green eyes shot flame at Montague then passed slowly to Nicholas' disheveled form where they lingered. The youth shook his head. "You consider this life...respectable?"

Nicholas sensed a motive beyond the simplicity of the question and it left him uneasy. He opened his mouth to respond when Montague angrily interrupted.

"Take her and go!"

The young man quelled a retort and turned a disdainful back on the two harlequins sprawled on the ground. He disappeared into the shadows toward the gondola.

Montague watched him go, then brushed himself off and sat up straight. "It's getting late, early or whatever. Anyhow, you'd best come home with me. It's not the Doges' Palace, but it'll be a roof over your head for the next few hours, and the bed's bug free. Well..." He hedged with a

wink, "...most of the time, anyway." He retrieved his yellow cap that had fallen on the grass and stood, rising to his lofty height. He plopped his hat atop his head and waited.

Nicholas looked up from where he sat on the lawn and studied the mortal, the regal poise he displayed despite the alcohol in his veins, the handsome face with its classically chiseled features and the dark hair that fell in waves past his shoulders, the yellow cap tipped at a cocky angle atop the curls. A young man he'd foolishly imagined he would have the privilege of calling friend. The ruse was done; it was time to go home...

When dawn came and the mortal had time to evaluate this night's events through a clear, sober gaze, no amount of explanation could cloud the facts. Montague would know that something was *deadly* wrong with his companion. Nicholas had to leave.

"Come on, Friend." Montague held out his hand. "Dawn's on its way."

"I know." The words were a mere whisper on the breeze. His heightened perception could sense the coming dawn, the gentle sweep of lavender on the far horizon, long before the human eye. Regret settled into his heart, and with it, a depth of loss he never thought to feel as he accepted the mortal's hand a final time and stood. "I can't come with you, Montague. You have no idea what you're offering."

"My hovel's humble but homey." He flashed a smile that refused to take no for an answer, then suddenly swayed.

Nicholas caught him with ease before he could slip to the ground.

He laughed and collapsed against the vampire's chest. His fair skin assumed a greenish cast. "Niccolo..."

"I have to go—"

The mortal's slender body went rigid against him, and the man heaved.

"Montague!" Nicholas' eyes widened in shock as the front of his tunic was assaulted by a spew of alcohol and substances he didn't want to imagine.

"Now we're *true* friends, you have to come home with me." The man fought to stand, failed and collapsed into the vampire's arms, laughing. "Besides, if we linger here much longer, I'll be extending my invitation to a pile of ash."

OOOOO

A lone figure lingered in the shadows.

A pair of dark eyes watched as Nicholas steadied the young man and struggled to lead him from the *piazza*. Finally, surrendering to the inevitable, Nicholas swooped the mortal into his arms and carried him into the night.

The figure stood frozen but its dark eyes followed their departure...

OOOOO

"You *know* what I am?"

The young man dipped his hands into the washbasin next to the bed where he sat, splashed water onto his face. Red-rimmed eyes looked up and studied the pale figure who hovered warily in the shadows of the far corner of the room. Montague nodded. "For weeks."

"Weeks."

"I suspected that you were...what you are, almost from the beginning, but now I'm certain."

"Yet you permitted me to remain among the group, said *nothing*." Incredulity constricted the voice that drifted from the shadows. "Why?"

"You posed no threat." Montague shrugged. "You're just one of the guys. If you wanted to pick us off, you'd of done it by now."

Unable to believe the casual way Montague was approaching the subject, Nicholas drifted into the center of the room and looked down at the young man sitting on the bed. "Do the others know? Have you told them?"

This produced a startled look on the mortal's face. "Do you think I'm crazy? Anyone familiar with your kind, whose lucky enough to still be breathing, knows the hazards of speaking of such things. I wouldn't utter the word aloud, much less speak of it to others."

"Even if you felt they were at risk?" The question lingered in the air between them; Nicholas held a torrent of emotion at bay in the silence that fell. This mortal, (his friend?) knew of the existence of vampires, yet sat calmly chatting about the subject in the sanctuary of his home, having invited such a creature into the very place where he slept, ate, lived, each and every day of his human existence...

"I can't answer that, Niccolo," he broke the silence. "Since I know they weren't at risk."

"How do you know of my kind?" His curiosity was so great, he couldn't stop the question from springing to his lips.

"I knew another of your kind. It's a knowledge I've lived with for many years." The young man dropped his eyes and looked away, suddenly evasive. "I won't speak of it; I'm quite aware of the risks of babbling on about such things. Yours is a secretive lot, and I think it's only fair that I extend that privacy to include everyone involved. I would no more speak of that creature to you than I would speak of it to a mortal. You may rest assured I will offer you that same anonymity."

The vampire stood in silence, unable to absorb the man's words; his thoughts in a whirl. "You know what I am, yet wish to retain my friendship?"

Montague's eyes passed over the sparse hovel that was his apartment and came to rest on the colorful pile of clothes in the corner, soiled and grass-stained from their late-night escapade. A smile tipped the corner of his lips. "After the baptism I put you though last night, I should ask the same of you, my friend."

The candid response tempted a smile from the vampire who stood frozen in the center of the room. LaCroix would never approve of such a relationship. The personas they donned to pass freely among mortals were masquerades, intended to ridicule as much as deceive those with whom they socialized. Mortals were playthings, nothing more.

This mortal threatened to change all that — irrevocably.

"It has been...so *long."* His words fell into the stillness of the room.

"Sun's up; the choice is yours." The man stifled a yawn, slapped his palm on the mattress and proudly announced, "Genuine feathers." With that he flopped back and rolled over onto his side. Within minutes, the gentle rhythm of his slumbered breathing filled the room.

Nicholas stood at the foot of the bed, a pale specter besieged by incredulity, his eyes locked on the trusting form curled in blissful sleep. In his *very* presence! Dawn threatened beyond the windowsill, barred and cloaked by the mortal in deference to his unusual guest. Still the vampire's eyes could discern traces of lavender light as it played upon the sleeping form, tinted the pale cheeks, deepened the raven hair. Montague stirred, his dark lashes fluttered against his cheeks but he slept on...

It was time to leave.

No good-byes, that was always easiest...

His feet refused to move. A century and a half of immortality, wonders beyond his wildest dreams revealed to him through LaCroix's wisdom, yet the simplest of concepts confounded and held him spellbound. Friendship.

He pulled air deeply into his lungs, dared the unthinkable and joined the sleeping mortal.

OOOOO

The summer sun rose high and as his resources waned the vampire slept. The mortal, slumbering on in innocent oblivion, sensed his presence and instinctively curled near, molded into the coolness of his back, a welcome relief to the rising noonday heat. Blood-scent and mortal musk invaded the vampire's senses, drew him to full awareness and his eyes snapped open.

Prey!

It was near...too near.

His young friend lay sleeping, curled against his back, trusting that all was right with his world...

Nicholas moved to the bench adjacent the silent hearth.

OOOOO

"You can help me, Niccolo, I know you can."

"I don't see how."

"By convincing Francisco del Fiore you're a suitable candidate for apprenticeship and eventual partnership. You can prove to him that we aren't the pack of shiftless wastrels that he thinks. Giovan and Lorenzo attend the university during the day; Mario will undoubtedly accept apprenticeship with the guild, and Orlando comes from a revered line of professional minstrels who've performed before kings and princes all across Europe."

Nicholas was quite aware of Orlando's exalted lineage. In fact, he'd known the family of minstrels over a century before; they frequented the jousting tournaments where they lauded the valor and heroism of the gallant knights in their fierce pageantry as they displayed their jousting and the art of *haute école*. They exalted the virtues of one young knight in particular, one most inclined to grant favors and "gifts" in payment for such publicity. Nicholas had presented the family with many a shilling and even a horse or two upon occasion. He considered the investment a worthy one.

The memories were strong within his mind even now, a century and a half later. Though such competitions had long since been refined and

even licensed, lessening the brutality of their original intention and glamorizing them for the genteel spectacle of public entertainment...

"With your foot in the door, I might stand a chance of convincing del Fiore that I'm worthy of his daughter."

Montague's voice tore him from his thoughts and he turned to face his friend. "You possess true feelings for this woman?"

"Beyond anything I've ever experienced," he breathed. "I've tried to distance myself. My God, the man's threatened my very existence, but I can't help myself. I'm possessed."

"You're only making matters worse by sullying her in gondolas and rose gardens. She's the daughter of a wealthy silk merchant not a woman of common birth."

He sank to a stool and dropped his face into his hands. "Don't you think I know that? I've tried to control myself, but I'm powerless."

"What makes you think I stand any more of a chance of impressing del Fiore than you?"

"Come on, Niccolo, you and I both know this guise of yours is just a lark. You have the ability, the connections, to be anyone, anything, you choose. You're over- qualified for apprenticeship as a silk merchant or anything else for that matter. You could be a master of most anything."

"You greatly exaggerate, I'm sure." Nicholas stopped short of adding that he'd known Marco Polo, himself. "I'm not so ancient as you seem to think I am nor as experienced. But you're correct, I have been a merchant and quite a successful one."

"Then you'll do it!"

"I didn't say that. Regardless of the experience I may have or any powers of persuasion I may employ, there's no guarantee."

"You have an advantage of which you aren't even aware." A sly grin passed over the young man's lips and he sprang to his feet in a burst of renewed enthusiasm. "Bianca confessed to me that her elder sister Antonia caught sight of you several weeks ago, and Bianca's certain the girl's smitten. Antonia denied it, of course, but no one knows her quite as well as Bianca, and she swears it's true."

"You aren't suggesting I court the interests of this woman." He looked surprised. "A mortal?"

"Nay, nothing serious." The young man slipped an arm around his shoulders and leaned near. "Just be your charming self." He reached up and gave his cheek an affectionate pat. "Give her that boyish grin."

Nicholas frowned.

He coaxed him with a long-suffering look.

"I'll...consider it."

"Fair enough." He slapped his shoulder with a resounding pat.

Nicholas turned away from him, toward the vestiges of light ebbing through the shuttered windows and his eyes locked on the glow as it slowly faded to dim. "I must go," he breathed. "But I'll return in time for tonight's performance."

Silence settled around them until Montague chose to disperse it. "You're going to feed, aren't you?"

Nicholas pulled a swift intake of breath and turned toward the mortal, surprised by the bluntness of his observation as well as its accuracy. He hadn't fed since the night before and hunger clawed at his entrails, summoned him into the shroud of coming night. "Yes."

The young man leaned near, draped against his back and breathed into his ear, "Let me watch."

"*What!*"

"I want to *see* you do it."

"*Never,*" he gasped unable to believe he was hearing such a request.

"Fair's, fair." The violet eyes twinkled with mischief. "You watched me."

Words escaped the vampire and he stood in a stupor.

"Come on, Niccolo, you can't tell me you didn't feel anything as you watched me with Bianca. I want to know what it's like for you."

"I can't...what you're suggesting. I could never allow such a thing." He took a hesitant step back. "It's an act of survival. A necessity."

"Nothing more?" Montague bridged the gap between them, cast him a knowing smirk. "Give me more credit than that, my friend. What do you *feel* when you take a woman or a man for that matter, what's it like?"

"It's impossible to describe." He looked away as a torrent of undefined emotions swept over him. "I shouldn't be having this discussion with you, Montague, there are rules among our kind, enforcers who would harm you if they knew I breached such confidences."

"I'm aware of these enforcers of yours, and you aren't breaching a confidence. I already know of the existence of vampires so I'm not in any more danger today than yesterday. You're avoiding my question." Excitement deepened the hue of his cheeks. "What's it like?"

"It is...everything. The blood is *everything*," he breathed. "The drive eclipses all others. The desire to feed, especially when the nectar is pure

and sweet, encompasses your entire being." Nicholas shook his head and turned away. "Beyond that, I am powerless to describe it."

"It's sexual?"

"Yes."

"I knew it!" The young man grinned. "Take me along, just this once, and my curiosity will be sated. You can't tell me the prospect doesn't thrill you, that you aren't intrigued by the risk of such a tawdry escapade."

The vampire's eyes widened with appall. "You know not of what you speak. The risks of lingering too near a fire that's flame so quickly and utterly consumes."

"Nay, I don't want to be what you are, Niccolo, trust me; I would never relinquish the life god has given me. I faced that choice years ago and made my peace with who and what I am. Mortal. My desire for Bianca and the life we may one day share far surpasses what your life may offer, no offense intended."

"None taken. I too made a choice and for me it was the right one."

"Then take me with you." He beamed with enthusiasm and grabbed his arm, leaned near to his face and enticed. "You can't tell me the idea doesn't excite you as much as it does me. That it doesn't send tingles through whatever part of you experiences such ecstasy."

Nicholas pulled in his breath, held it. If LaCroix even suspected his involvement in such an escapade he would find himself in chains or worse. The master vampire could instruct with benevolence and breadth of understanding far surpassing anyone he'd ever known. But when challenged...

Nicholas shuddered at the thought.

"I'm sorry, Montague, I can't."

OOOOO

The wench was comely if not pure. A lass of English origin. Her chestnut locks fell in lustrous waves that caught the candlelight and glowed. The light swept across her olive skin, over a dusting of pale freckles gracing her shoulders that peeked above her low-cut gown.

Nicholas gently brushed his hand across her supple flesh, traced the fragile bones tapered to the base of her throat. Lingered.

The woman moaned and sank back into his embrace as he leaned against the headboard of the elaborately carved canopy bed draped in scarlet damask.

She rested her head upon his chest. "Such luxury, milord. You are a gentlemen of discriminating taste, my pale-haired beauty."

Actually, the room was ostentatious and not at all to his liking, but the stewholder had been well paid and he offered no objection when his "property," the wench, was removed from his brothel and spirited away into the night. This room with its damask and brocade, walls draped in brilliant tapestry from the far-east, seemed garishly appropriate.

His hand crept to the generous swell of her breasts straining from the plunge of her bodice, dipped inside, cupped a supple lobe. He bent and pressed his lips to her flesh.

She sighed aloud, entwined her fingers in his hair and held him close, invited his lips' caress.

He raised his head, gripped her hair, roughly took her mouth and absorbed her moans with his lips. His hand moved to her ankle, grabbed the embroidered edge of her kirtle that peeked beneath her hem and rustled the folds of fabric upward past slender calves, toward firm thighs.

She squealed with delight. "Do you prefer a ride that's rough, my randy?" She fought to pull him down atop her. "'Tis always the ones most angelic of face who desire their *fokken* hardest." Her legs wrapped around his waist and she sought to pin him.

Her flesh burned with mortal heat. Honey-scented, her blood filled the air, enticed his senses. He pushed her gown upward; his fingers traced teasing patterns up her thighs, retreated, and returned to claim the warmth between her legs.

He froze and a frown creased his brow.

Laughter rippled from her throat. "'My quim 'tis bald!" She reached up and playfully stroked the shaven-half of his head. "Like you."

His eyes widened and he pushed up her skirts. Pale, smooth skin without a whisper of hair greeted his gaze.

Her giggles filled the air.

He shook his head, laughed and buried his face against the shaven flesh, anointed it with his lips.

She cried out in pleasure and gripped the golden locks atop his head buried among the folds of her dress, arched toward the ecstasy...

He raised his head, his generous mouth tinted by a trace of crimson.

She reached out to enfold him in her arms when her eyes caught the scarlet trail laced along the inside of her thigh and a gasp escaped her lips. "What are you doing?" She fought to pull away.

"Easy, pretty one." He seized her head, forced her golden-brown eyes to meet with his. His voice fell to a soothing whisper. "Everything is as it should be."

She slipped without protest into the blue serenity of his eyes that beckoned from the innocence of his angelic face. "'Tis as it should be." The words fell from her lips.

His sensuous, full mouth tipped into a smile; his lips parted, revealed the gleam of fangs, eyes that glowed.

"'Tis as it should be," the woman repeated softly as she laid back against the pillows in supplication.

The beast growled deep within his throat and Nicholas threw back his head, buried his face into the warmth between her thighs, sank his fangs into the tender flesh...

A cry tore from the woman's lips and she shuddered with ecstasy. Her essence peeked and orgasm claimed her as the vampire deeply fed, then slowly she waned, ebbed and faded into eternity's awaiting embrace...

Nicholas quaked in the throes of lust, tore his lips from her flesh and even as her warmth drained, he lay prostrate across the length of the enormous bed, his cheek pressed tightly against her inner thigh and pulled air into his lungs to still his trembling limbs.

"Admit it, Niccolo, this was just as thrilling as I said it would be."

He raised his head and met his companion's eyes.

Montague slipped from the shadows and neared the bed, looked down at him and grinned. "Admit it."

Nicholas stilled the beating of his heart and sat up. He gave the young man a stiff nod. "Was it what you imagined?"

"Yea and nay." The man thought for a moment then continued, "It was sensuous, of that there's no doubt."

The vampire found himself smiling. In spite of his initial reluctance to engage in Montague's lark, the young man was right, it had been a sensuous experience. One he would not soon forget.

"Still, one has to question how you do it. I couldn't."

A frown creased Nicholas' brow. "Couldn't what?"

Montague's eyes absorbed the almost boyish innocence of Nicholas' face, the rounded cheeks, the crystal-blue eyes, then moved on to study the serene form of the comely wench poised as if in sleep, her chestnut locks framing a halo around her eternally pale face. "I couldn't...live with the guilt."

"Just be nice to her. I'm not asking you to marry the woman," Montague hissed beneath his breath as they waited in the immense foyer of *Signore* del Fiore's *palazzo* adjacent to the Grand Canal. Grecian columns supported a spacious ceiling that towered overhead; its surface inlayed with elaborate mosaics gilded in gold. "If you can win *Signorina* Antonia over, *Signore* del Fiore will quickly follow. He and Antonia are always at odds but he respects her opinion."

"This is pure folly, Montague," Nicholas protested. "Even if I manage to impress this lady it can't possibly improve your standing with *Signore* del Fiore."

"You're the only chance I've got. I have nothing to offer Bianca other than my love and willingness to work even in the lowliest of positions until I've made a name for myself."

Nicholas hated to dissuade such heart-felt determination but Montague's goal seemed more and more unobtainable. Apparently the young man's family, if he possessed any, maintained no significant social standing to merit del Fiore's attention. Nor could Nicholas discern any signs of inherited wealth, unlike some of the other young men who gallivanted through the *calli* at night but attended classes by day. Montague was a student at the university until his funds dwindled and he dropped out, but when questioned about his past, he maintained an evasiveness that was frustrating.

"You've improved my luck already," Montague interrupted his thoughts. "This is the first time I've actually been inside the house by invitation."

Nicholas opened his mouth to respond when a flaxen beauty appeared in the arched entryway and the words died on his lips. A whisper of loveliness draped in silk, the woman moved toward him, her deep green eyes aglow with an intensity that encompassed everyone they lit upon.

Nicholas pulled in his breath; this was the woman whose beauty captured his attention from the crowd weeks ago.

A morose shadow darkened the woman's wake, the stern young man who confronted Montague near the gondola two nights before. His moss-green eyes held no affinity as they locked disdainfully upon Nicholas' companion.

But unlike her escort, the woman's eyes brightened with radiance and she swept across the foyer toward them. She paused long enough to

cast a clandestine glance over her shoulder before dashing past Nicholas and throwing herself into Montague's arms.

The man crushed her to his chest in an impassioned embrace; he sought her lips, and the two were lost to all but each other in the moments that followed.

Nicholas quelled a hint of disappointment and concluded the woman must be the ravishing Bianca del Fiore he'd heard so much about. It was easy to understand his friend's obsession. Beauty such as hers failed the hearts of many a young man since the dawn of time.

A throat was cleared and the couple quickly broke apart; they turned in unison to Bianca's companion.

"Niccolo." Montague motioned him near, while retaining his possessive hold on Bianca. "I'm afraid there wasn't time for proper introductions the other night. Things got a little crazy. But this—" He dipped his head toward the boy who stood studying them without expression, "—is *Signorina* Antonia del Fiore."

OOOOO

"So. You are qualified to assist the poor frail and ailing Francisco del Fiore?"

Nicholas was taken aback by the blatant sarcasm evident in Antonia del Fiore's tone. "I intend no disrespect with regard to the *Signore's* health. But in answer to your inquiry, if it was in fact an honest inquiry, yes, I am qualified."

The young woman studied him with an unreadable expression. They stood alone in the pavilion, primroses twined into the ornate latticework of the trellis, a blush of pink against the white. The lawns were immaculate, grass and shrubbery trimmed into a spacious carpet sweeping to the edge of the goldfish pond; the crystal waters shimmered beneath the moon's pale glow.

Her moss green eyes studied him without comment.

Nicholas found himself uneasy beneath the intensity of her stare as he was struck once again by the convergence of genders her appearance conveyed. Her non assuming tunic, lose fitting britches tied at the waist by a simple drawstring, the scandalously cropped hair, light brown locks that framed the oval of her pale face, a face from which intelligent eyes appraised and relentlessly evaluated the world around her.

Heresy. Hadn't the church declared such blatant disregard for socially appropriate gender distinction to be a form of heresy?

Nicholas shook his head and chastised himself for allowing his senses to become so distracted that he hadn't detected her gender at once. Mortals were easily deceived by mere appearance but it should not have been true of him. He inhaled deeply, absorbed the fresh scent of cinnamon and spice, the unique fragrance of the young woman's blood...

"Now, if we've finished sizing one another up, we can get down to basic facts." She intruded upon his thoughts. "You claim to be qualified..."

"It is not simply a claim."

She paused; her eyes passed over him. "This is why you spend your evenings cavorting in the *piazza* with a troupe of..." She raised her dark brows, "...equally qualified young men in feather caps and bicolor hose."

"I have learned that one's clothing seldom reflects true content." He met her gaze with equal intensity.

She blinked in surprise and gave him a stiff nod. "Point well taken."

"It has also been my experience, *Signorina,* that the frivolity of youth and their unconventional fads of fashion are universal concepts. That spark of individuality shines, albeit briefly, as a glimmer of the spirit within, until convention prevails and their brilliance is eclipsed by the mundane demands of society's constraints." He shrugged. "In other words, adulthood. Such things are nothing less than the death throes of adolescence."

"Society's constraints," she repeated softly. "How well I know them."

"My companions," he continued. "While unconventional, are hardly shiftless young men. Most attend the university and several come from quite prominent families. Appearances—" his eyes passed over her "—Can be quite deceiving."

The whisper of a frown marred her brow. "These observations are the conclusions you've drawn from *years* of worldly experience?"

He paused and met her probing gaze, noted the suspicion lingering within and reevaluated the direction of their conversation. "I am, of course, prepared to present any letters of recommendation or documents necessary to support my claims."

"Without doubt."

Her words fell into the strained silence that settled between them; a chorus of night insects rose to fill it.

"The fair of St. Jean is one of the most important of the Champagne Fairs attended by our family. The del Fiores have presented the finest silk Venice has to offer for over three generations, and that is no small claim. Venice is the reigning Mecca of such commerce. Our weaving centers are surpassed by no other. Though some might argue that Florence places a close second—" She tilted her petite nose upward, "—I would say the discrepancy is much greater. They specialize in scarlet dyes, but our looms produce the most exquisite taffeta, velvet and crepe the Champagne Fairs have to offer. We have never missed being represented."

"And this year?"

"The summer fair is by far the hottest, the journey to Troyes, tedious and long. Francisco managed the trip to pay the annual guild's license several months back; he's always insisted upon doing such things himself, but the weather was much cooler then." The young woman paused, her thoughts turned inward and her voice fell to a whisper as if speaking the words aloud would make them true. "I feel he is nearing the last of his summer fairs."

The imminent mortality of all things human, a familiar voice echoed in Nicholas' head, *I have spared you the indignities of such, mon enfant.* Words of comfort in a world of misery, sickness, plague and the most relentless of affronts, the insult of old age.

"Don't misunderstand, Francisco is still strong and his faculties far surpass those of anyone I've ever known, but the heat, you understand..."

"I understand," he responded softly and met the young woman's eyes. "*Signore* del Fiore is held in the highest of regards by all who know him socially as well as those with which he has done business over the decades. None would dare call him frail."

A subtle softening at the corners of her mouth produced an almost charming effect on Antonia's face but her words retained their edge. "I shall be blunt."

He refrained from commenting on the obvious nature of her statement. Was she capable of being anything other than blunt?

"The family of Francisco del Fiore requires no outside assistance nor representation, despite what you may have heard."

He frowned in confusion. "But you just said..."

"The transportation, distribution and exhibition of del Fiore silk, as well as all details related to this and other dispositions of commerce and Champagne Fairs, shall henceforth be conducted—" her poise as she stared

up at him from her diminutive height dared no dissension when she announced, "—by me."

OOOOO

"She likes you, I can tell."

Nicholas' eyes widened in surprise.

"She actually spoke to you; that's a first," Montague insisted. "And I know for a fact she's been badgering Bianca with questions about you, as well as offering her blatant critique of your—" his eyes passed over his companion's brilliant hose and he grinned, "—more than adequate attributes."

"So much for her scathing criticism of our 'costumes'." He reached for his fuchsia cap and placed it atop his golden curls, the crowning touch to the outfit he was donning.

The young man's grin widened.

"*Signorina* Antonia is determined to maintain self-sufficiency. She intends to take over the business on her own. Which I suspect, she practically runs behind the scenes as it is."

Montague stalled in surprise then burst into laughter. "And I suppose she intends to oversee not only the processing and weaving but the transport of goods as well. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Unconventional, but not impossible."

"She's demented. People have said it for years, now I know it's true."

"It makes sense; after all, it is her family's business, their heritage and her legacy." In fact, it began to make perfect sense, the woman's obstinate demeanor, her unconventional mode of dress. He began to suspect that Antonia del Fiore was maintaining a barrier between the aging Francisco and the relentless outside world of commerce, and had been for quite some time. The young woman did not strike him as incompetent or impulsive, simply determined.

"Even if she could succeed." His friend interrupted as if reading his thoughts. "No one would ever, openly, negotiate with the woman. The legalities alone boggle the mind. She has to take on a respectable partner or god forbid actually marry."

"With so much at stake, I'm surprised no acceptable suitors have stepped forward to vie for her attention."

The man's eyes grew round. "At risk of life and limb. Antonia's wrath makes Francisco seem tame in comparison. That she has lowered herself to even speak with you is a major achievement. I've no doubt, the woman's loins would freeze a man's dagger to the bone."

"Francisco has made no efforts with regards to his eldest daughter's betrothal or marriage?"

"He abandoned such attempts years ago when his wife died. Antonia practically raised Bianca, dolts over her, in fact. It's hard to believe she's capable of such depth of affection, but she adores Bianca."

"She's determined not to marry?"

"Determined is an understatement. Francisco's final attempt resulted in the cropping of her hair and the shredding of her entire collection of gowns. Ironic, isn't it, the man's a silk merchant and his daughter wears linen and horse hair shirts. Can you imagine such a thing?" He cringed. "The way they *feel*?"

Silk was the preferred fabric of choice the vampire most often wore against his overly-sensitive skin, and the thought of anything so coarse made him shudder. "Then marriage would appear to be out of the question as a solution."

"Unless you're vying for the position, my friend." The young man winked.

"To a mortal!"

"And what a mortal." Montague laughed. "That leaves Antonia with our original solution — a partner, and myself with an obvious advantage." He sauntered close, draped his arm around the vampire's shoulder, leaned near and breathed, "After all, I'm that gentleman's best friend."

OOOOO

"Are you enjoying your little escapade, Nicholas?"

The smooth cultured tone caught him by surprise and Nicholas gave a start, turned and found an elegant presence lingering in the center of the apartment.

Impressive in a surcoat of brocade and velvet, a scarlet mantle broached at his chest and draped across one broad shoulder, LaCroix's eyes swept over the sparse furnishings and came to rest on the young vampire's face. "So this is your humble abode these days?"

"It suits my purpose."

"Which is?"

"To complete the persona." Nicholas shrugged with feigned nonchalance. "A fleeting fancy, no more."

"Ah, yes, your charming little street performing. Quite impressive, actually."

His eyes widened. "You've seen us?"

"A time or two. You are, of course, exemplary in your execution. That the endeavor holds no merit is irrelevant." His eyes again swept the apartment. "Surely our funds have not dwindled to such an extent that this hovel is all you can afford."

"It's part of the Bohemian charm of my current masquerade." He spread his arms to encompass his surroundings. "Don't you agree that it's more than appropriate?"

"For the persona, yes, for my Nicholas..." He raised a finely sculptured brow.

"It's all part of the game, LaCroix." He forced a smile to his lips. If LaCroix even suspected his true relationship with the mortal, he would drag him bodily from the apartment. "You of all people should know that."

He caught the young vampire with an unwavering look. "Indeed I do. No one knows, as well as I, the allure of games. Nor the consequence of wagering such sport against the wrong opponent."

Nicholas caught his breath, held it.

An icy smile touched the pale lips; LaCroix pressed those lips next to his ear. "Do not forget to whom you belong, my adventurous one, for that is a wager none but the most foolhardy of players would cast."

He stilled the sudden trembling of his heart and leaned near, rested his head lightly against the master vampire's cheek. "Could one forget the elixir from which all existence flows?"

A chuckle filtered softly through the air. "There are factors at play in this whimsical scenario of yours of which you are naïvely unaware."

"What are you talking—?"

In a whisper the vampire was gone.

Nicholas squeezed his eyes shut and breathed a sigh of relief.

OOOOO

"This is pure insanity!"

Mario's dark eyes twinkled with mirth. "Do you or do you not want to see your lovely, if only for a fleeting moment?"

Montague laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "You guys are crazy."

"Love makes fools of us all."

The group of eight agile young men clustered together near the base of the massive stone wall enclosing the courtyard of the del Fiore pavilion. In the distance the *palazzo* loomed, impressive and formidable.

A splash of color in the shadows, the young men whispered and huddled planning their assault. Moonlight caught the flutter of their plumed-caps as they scaled the wall in unison and dropped silently to the ground on the other side. Montague motioned toward the *palazzo* in the distance, to a balcony enclosed by gilded latticework on the second floor.

The others nodded.

Together they trotted across the manicured garden, past marble statues whose silent eyes watched their approach without complaint, past fountains flowing crystal waters in the starlight. Rose bushes framed the cobblestone trail.

Nicholas fell back from the group, paused, bent and snatched a crimson rose from the security of its bush before hurrying to catch up.

"Who makes up the base?" Mario whispered in the shadow of the ornate balcony.

"Lorenzo." Giovan motioned toward the young man in a royal blue cap who almost matched himself in size and weight. "And definitely Niccolo."

"You sure you want Niccolo?" Mario frowned.

"Trust me." He gave the man in question a robust slap on the back that he absorbed without flinching. "I'm certain."

Nicholas gave him a nod.

The group clustered beneath the balcony and stared upward as Montague moved forward into a pool of light. The glow caught the yellow plume of his cap, the locks of dark hair flowing past his shoulders. He tipped his face up and moonlight passed over the smile on his lips. He whistled and the sound rose clear and pure into the still night air — the perfect pitch of a meadow lark.

"What sort of meadow lark's going to be out here in the middle of the night?' Mario hissed beneath his breath.

"Only one." Montague caught his eyes then looked up toward the balcony as the curtains rustled and a shimmer of satin and silk slipped out into the starlight. The group sighed in unison as Bianca drifted near the

railing; her pale flaxen hair flowed freely over her shoulders and down her back, the oval of her face kissed by a blush of excitement.

Eight pair of eyes trained upward, absorbed the sight, not without a hint of longing, but her deep emerald eyes caught only one face. Montague's.

Giovan shifted near to Nicholas and rasped beneath his breath, "For once, I'm sorry to be wearing this constrictive outfit." A sheepish grin passed over his broad features. "It leaves a man no dignity."

Nicholas laughed and his eyes passed over the group, their faces lifted upward, moonlight painted their enraptured expressions. "If it's any consolation, Giovan, I've no doubt you're not alone in your...indignity."

The large man chuckled and slapped his shoulder with a resounding pat. "On your knees, knave, we've a job to do." He grabbed Lorenzo's arm and shoved him forward. "You, too."

Together the three would, on their hands and knees, form the base of a human pyramid stretching upward toward the balcony and the lady above. The group gathered near and Giovan fell to his knees, followed by Lorenzo. Nicholas started to kneel, paused and stepped over to Montague whose enthralled eyes were trained upward. He touched the man's arm and he turned.

Nicholas smiled, held out the rose.

Montague's eyes sparkled; he accepted the rose and clutched it in his teeth.

Nicholas returned to the group, fell to his knees and in flawless unison the others piled atop the sturdy base, each in turn; the pyramid rose...

Bianca's eyes widened in surprise.

The human edifice complete, Montague appeared and with agility and grace scaled the mountain, the rose clutched in his teeth, a grin in his eyes.

Bianca clapped her hands in glee, accepted the gift and as the man slipped over the rail she enfolded him in her arms.

The pyramid scattered in a collage of color; seven smiling faces trained upward toward the embracing couple.

Montague honored them with a most gracious bow which they silently applauded, then he swooped the fair lady from her feet, gown flowing as a whisper on the night wind, and they disappeared beyond the curtain...

OOOOO

Mortal youth is such a fleeting, ephemeral thing.

The thought wafted though the vampire's mind as the group dispersed into the garden to allow the couple a moment of privacy.

Rash and impulsive, they shouldn't have brought the two together, but a smile danced in his eyes as he wandered toward the vine-entwined gazebo nestled near the goldfish pond. The scent of roses and honeysuckle wafted through the air, carried on the night breeze.

The innocence of love.

A hint of cinnamon and spice, the unique mingling of her blood-scent reached the vampire's senses even before the rhythm of her mortal heart and he stalled in surprise.

Antonia del Fiore was in the gazebo.

He turned to flee into the darkness when the rustling of her movement reached his ears and her presence shadowed the arched entryway twined in primroses...

OOOOO

"They're at it again, aren't they?"

Nicholas reached for her arm and stalled her descent down the steps. "If you 'rouse *Signore* Francisco it will only make matters worse."

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

Their eyes locked.

"Such foolishness," she breathed, breaking the impasse. "Nothing can ever come of it. The young man is not her equal. He has no family, no wealth to offer."

"Love, *Signorina."* He slowly ascended the steps and joined her. "What of that?"

"Love will only break his heart. Alas, my sweet Bianca is not all she seems." The young woman turned and retreated into the starlit seclusion of the gazebo.

Curious, Nicholas followed.

"I see the question in your eyes, *Signore* Niccolo." She moved to the bench and sat, motioned for him to join her. "It is as much for the benefit of your friend as for Bianca that I disapprove. She knows the hopelessness of this game she's playing and cares nothing for the destruction of his heart that she'll leave in her wake."

He joined her on the bench. "He may not possess wealth, but his interests are true. Your father will never find her a better match. Love as strong as theirs is nothing to be scoffed at."

"You must think me a harsh, callous creature." Her moss green eyes met his, their gaze softened by a touch of filtered light within the latticework of shadows that washed over them. "I have learned to be hard. Bianca is more than a handful as you've no doubt noted, and with Francisco's health failing..."

"All the more reason to reconsider my offer."

Her dark brows froze into a stern line above her eyes.

"*Signorina,* it is not my intention to assume control of your family's legacy nor to circumvent your authority."

Suspicion marred her expression. "*My* authority?"

"If you will forgive my bluntness, it is apparent that your influence far exceeds that of a daughter looking out for her father's interests." He drew a deep breath and plunged ahead. "You've been controlling del Fiore silk for months, haven't you?"

Antonia raised her chin and without bothering to deny his words, accused, "You find it amusing, don't you? The laughingstock of Venice, jester to the Doge, del Fiore's *son*. Don't you imagine I've heard all the anointed titles with which I've been christened." The pale oval of her face framed by her cropped hair, darkened in anger. "You and your motley cohorts slither like thieves into our *giardino* and you possess the audacity to look down your nose at me—"

"You believe it was my intention to insult you?" He gasped in surprise. "I have nothing but admiration for your efforts."

Her mouth snapped shut in shock.

"Obviously you care deeply for your family and would do anything to protect their interests, regardless of the public consequences. How could I possibly fault that?"

Her eyes widened and for a moment she studied him in silence. "The fact that I'm a woman..."

"Complicates the issue to be sure. But without doubt, some of the strongest creatures I have ever known have shared your gender. Society's constraints are not easily overcome; it takes an extremely strong-willed individual to accomplish it. I've no doubt you are such an individual."

Silence constricted the moment.

He studied the diminutive boyish features of her face, the closely cropped hair, the drab tunic and britches, but beneath the facade the strength

of her spirit beckoned to him in the spice of her blood; cinnamon flared his nostrils and he tore his eyes away.

"Do you have family?" she asked.

Her words brought to mind an image of the unique couple residing in their elaborate apartments towering above the Grand Canal, ever-present extensions of himself; shelter from the storm of life's uncertainty. He nodded.

"Do you love them?"

"Eternally," he breathed.

Her face softened. "Then perhaps you do understand. We protect those whom we love. Del Fiore silk is not simply a business, it encompasses all that we are and have been for over three generations. Society would ask, nay demand, that I relinquish it into the hands of a husband simply because by virtue of fate my gender does not fit the constraints of their demands."

Nicholas studied the woman, it was doubtful that anything about her would ever conform to the constraints of anyone's demands. "I can help you, *Signorina."*

"In exchange for a flea in Francisco's ear concerning your impetuous friend?" She caught him with an unrelenting stare.

He offered her what he hoped was his most charming grin.

"You, *Signore*, are shameless. Not only in your choice of attire—" her eyes swept over the form-fitting splash of fuchsia and chartreuse, came to rest upon the brilliant cap, "—But in the transparency of your motives."

His grin widened.

A smile tempted her lips. "I promise nothing but that I will reconsider your proposal." She rose to her feet and he followed. "I will offer you this, though, a word of warning. Several nights ago a stranger came to this house, making inquiries about your reckless companion. He was an impressive gentleman, richly dressed, extremely tall and dark. There was something about him..." She shuddered. "He made me uneasy. You may rest assured, he received no information from anyone in this household. But your group is quite garishly visible. It wouldn't take an act of God for this man to locate your friend."

Nicholas frowned. "Why are you telling me this? If you believe this man intends to confront Montague, why didn't you simply tell him where we reside? It would certainly solve your problem."

Her face darkened with anger. "Contrary to you impression of me, it is not harm that I wish upon your friend. In fact, I wish him quite the opposite. That is why he should cease to lavish his affections upon my Bianca. She will only break his intrepid heart."

"I'm sorry," he told her sincerely. "My comments were inappropriate. You're right. We're a shiftless lot who've invaded your home without invitation and I'm hardly in a position to insult you."

"Scaling private walls." She pursed her lips with indignation. "Traipsing though the *giardino* like a whimsical pack of leprechauns. You're fortunate we don't keep guard dogs on the grounds. Although it bears considering." She raised a dark brow and pinned him with a look.

"We shall bear that in mind. *Signorina.*" He gave her a formal bow and turned to leave.

"Signore?"

He turned and met her gaze.

Two moss green eyes glimmered up at him. "I was just wondering."

He froze in astonishment when her small hand slapped his derrière. Words escaped him and he stood in stunned silence as she announced,

"It *is* as tight as it looks."

OOOOO

"You have to be honest with me, Montague, if you want my help."

"I've told you everything I know!" He threw up his hands and started to walk away.

"Who's looking for you?" Nicholas pinned him with his eyes. "And why?"

"I don't know!"

"Why don't I believe you?"

"You're suspicious by nature?" He offered sarcastically. "How the hell should I know? Some mysterious dark fellow's looking for me. So what!"

"If you're in danger, you have to confide in me. Don't try to handle this on your own." He leaned near, stared deeply into the man's face and whispered, "I thought we were friends."

Montague swallowed hard.

"I suppose that means nothing to you—"

"Don't try that crap on me, Niccolo," he snapped. "You know damn good and well we're friends, and it means a hell of a lot to me."

"Does it?" The words echoed into the strained silence that fell between them.

The man turned away.

"I suppose that answers my question." He cut the chill of the room with his blunt conclusion. "You have no idea how long it's been since I've trusted *anyone* to the extent that I've trusted you — confided in you!"

The mortal squeezed his eyes shut and said nothing.

"Yet what do I truly know about you? Have you, in turn, confided anything to me?"

"There's nothing to tell!" The words ripped from his lips. "I'm *no one*."

"Everyone is someone."

"Not me." His voice fell to a whisper and he sank to a stool, dropped his face into his hands. "I was born in Marseilles, conceived in a ditch."

"What?"

"I'm a *bastard*, Niccolo." He raised his head and spat the words. "There, I've said it; are you happy? I haven't told you about my family, because I don't have one. My mother's dead, may she rest in peace, and I haven't an inkling who sired me. I'm a god-damned bastard."

Nicholas sank to the floor at Montague's side and rested his hand on his knee. "Your mother never told you who your father was?" he asked softly.

"It's a thousand times worst than that." His eyes focused on a far corner of the room as his thoughts turned inward. "She never knew. Rumors abound, of course, as they always do. Some say it was a soldier, others, a knight traveling through the port on his way to the Holy Land. Marseilles is such a bustling place, who's to say."

"She had no idea?" He struggled to form a delicate inquiry. "You don't think she was merely trying to protect you from the truth of his identity for some reason?"

"She was ravaged in a ditch, stabbed and left to die. I hardly think she was trying to protect my feelings."

Nicholas squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"I was luckier than most. Many women cannot bear to even look upon such a child, much less lavish it with affection as she did. Her family tried to rid her of me, attempted all manner of elixirs and wormwood, but she refused them all, refused their wrath, the scorn and ridicule of God-fearing men and women who would not walk on the same side of the street as she. When her family turned its back, she raised me on her own." He

paused, looked around at his humble surroundings and spread his hands. "This place is a palace in comparison. She told me that I was special, god's gift to her, that I should forgive the foolishness of ignorant people."

"But you survived," Nicholas added softly.

"I survived," he repeated. "I've known hunger and cold that you can't possibly imagine, times when she fed me the only scrapes of food she possessed, warmed me with hands that were frigid. But, yes, we survived."

Silence rose to claim the moment and Nicholas studied the face of his mortal companion, the classically defined cheeks, the uniquely-tinted eyes, the waves of raven hair. Who did he most resemble, his mother or...

The fiend who fathered him?

Nicholas' eyes passed over their sparse apartment, the feather bed of which the mortal was so proud, a washbasin, a bench nestled next to the hearth, an assortment of stools. He thought of the elegance and luxury of the apartments overlooking the canal that he abandoned for this "masquerade." Obviously, Montague was aware of the fact that Nicholas possessed much greater resources than he, and yet—

Never once had he asked for so much as a shilling.

In fact, the young mortal had given freely of himself, his home and most importantly, his friendship.

"I've made a lot of mistakes." The man broke the silence with his confession. "And if you must know, this man who's searching for me...it's possible that he's followed me here from Nice. I..." He looked aside. "...Sort of disappeared after accumulating one too many gambling debts."

Nicholas sighed and shook his head. "I can help you—"

"No!" The young man's eyes hardened with resolve. "I don't want you involved. I'll face him myself and see what I can work out."

Nicholas wanted to insist that he was more than financially secure enough to help, but the look of determination on his friend's face told him the man needed to hold tight to his own personal dignity without outside interference.

Reluctantly, he nodded. "As you wish."

OOOOOO

He hated to open the door.

Even though it opened into the seclusion of the hall, presenting no risk of exposure to the sun, Nicholas was more than a little leery of venturing

forth from any "lair" he'd chosen for his daylight hours. It was an ingrained caution, intrinsic to his kind, and one he seldom breached.

There was nothing quite so menacing as a vampire protecting its burrow...

The knock was persistent.

He reached for the lock, it turned with a resounding "clank," and he cautiously cracked the door, peeked into the hall.

A young woman waited beyond. Her face was plain but not unpleasant, wide intelligent eyes met his. Her unassuming frock was drab and unadorned but it flattered her petite form, presenting if not a ravishing picture at least a pretty one.

She shifted with impatience, her eyes narrowed and she huffed. "Have I mistaken you for a gentleman or are you going to invite me in?" Without waiting for a reply she swept past him and into the room.

Surprised by her abruptness, he almost forgot to close the door. "Is there something that I can do for you?"

"I've come to discuss your offer."

"My offer...?" He caught the aroma of her blood, cinnamon with a hint of spice, and his eyes flew wide. "*Signorina* Antonia!"

She folded her arms across her chest and faced him squarely.

"You've changed your clothes. They're..."

"Appropriate? The same could be said of you." Her eyes passed over his traditional attire. Gone was the brilliant fuchsia and chartreuse, replaced by a long royal blue tunic appropriately tapered to frame but not constrain his physique. "Now if we've dispensed with our mutual fashion critiques, perhaps we can get down to business."

Nicholas shook his head and tried to clear it. Mid-day was difficult enough for the vampire to endure without adding Antonia to the equation. "You've come to discuss my proposal?"

"Actually, to offer a counter-proposal."

He ran his hand through his hair, dislodged the locks into disarray and stifled a yawn.

"You look tired." She observed with impatience. "Perhaps if you offered me a seat, you might take one yourself. Sitting down is far preferable to falling down."

He nodded and motioned toward the bench. She sat and he joined her.

"Gallivanting throughout the night has its disadvantages, it would seem," she commented.

"I'm much more of a...night person." Again, he yawned.

"And your companion?" She glanced around the apartment.

"Montague's assisting with the renovation of St. Marks."

"So, your friend has acquired a position; I'm pleased for him."

"I don't get the impression that you ventured into this part of the city to discuss our personal life."

"Correct."

"You've decided to consider my offer?" He knew that any profitable association with a prominent family such as the del Fiores would meet with LaCroix's approval. Moving in renowned social circles, partaking of the finest life had to offer was second nature to the master vampire and was far preferable to his protégé's current endeavors.

"Not exactly." The young woman glanced down at her hands clutched in her lap.

The thought was ridiculous, but if he hadn't known better, he could be fooled into believing she was nervous.

She raised her head and a constrained calm filled her voice. "I have never been known for subtlety. Nor am I inclined to trifle with the coy nuances of social refinement of which my gender is rightfully accused. It has been said of me that I am direct, and though some may find that crude in a woman of my social standing, I consider it honest."

He nodded without comment, intensely curious to discover where this discussion was leading...

"I am here to offer a counter-proposal of marriage."

OOOOOO

Nicholas would have burst into laughter if the woman's expression hadn't been so deathly serious. He sat in stunned silence, unable to form a suitable response. Her calm voice rose to fill the hush.

"I will not seek to deceive you, *Signore*, I have made numerous inquires concerning you over the past few weeks, and this—" She glanced around the crude apartment, "—Is no more than a lark for a man of your social standing. I know that your status would meet with Francisco's approval."

"The caliber of one's home is seldom indicative of the caliber of one's *true* status." He rose to his feet. Any information the woman may have uncovered concerning his identity and social status was, of course,

part of an intricately contrived ruse he and his "family" employed wherever they traveled. "You, *Signorina* del Fiore, are a snob."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I deserved that. But you must understand, it is not my criteria that we are speaking of, but Francisco's. He would never agree to anything less than social equality with regards to such a proposal. We are, after all, talking about del Fiore silk and that, *Signore*, is not a minor legacy or inheritance. He will not pass it into any hands of which he does not approve."

"Perhaps we can dispense with the title, *Signore*; my name is Nicholas. After all, you are proposing marriage are you not?"

Color warmed her cheeks. "I am not given to delusion...Niccolo, I realize that I am not an attractive woman. We needn't jest ourselves into pretending this would be a true marriage. We would retain separate rooms, separate lives if you wish. You can continue to be a *night person*, for all I care." She threw up her hands in frustration. "Although, street-performing is bound to be frowned upon by those who might seek to do business with my family."

"Antonia." His hand fell to her shoulder and his voice dropped to a whisper. "What has happened? What is the true motivation of your visit? This is far too radical a proposition to have sprang from thin air."

The young woman bit into her lip.

"My original offer of limited partnership is far more feasible."

"It will never appease him!" she cried, breaking her silence. "I don't understand your hesitation. What I'm offering far surpasses mere partnership. You would own del Fiore silk."

"I don't want to own it." Although LaCroix would be "tickled" by the concept of such a profitable and platonic union, Nicholas was disturbed by the woman's abrupt turnabout.

"Surely I am not so unappealing as *that*."

"Hardly." He sank to the floor beside the bench where she sat. In fact the aroma of her blood-scent was anything but unappealing. "Your appearance is hardly the reason for my reticence. My reason lies elsewhere. But for now I seek only to understand why you've made this offer. What has changed in the last few days?"

"Francisco's health is far worse than I've led you to believe," she confessed softly. "He's determined to set his affairs in order before his death."

The fragility of mortal existence, a familiar voice wafted through his head. *No matter the prestige, the power, the wealth, there exists but one*

thing to which all mortals must one day succumb — the ravages of time. Terra es, terram ibis.

"He's determined that no less than a son, even by virtue of marriage, will suffice to appease his demands for eventual relinquishment of our legacy." Her jaw hardened with anger. "So be it."

"Why now? Why me?"

"It has little to do with you, other than the fact that I know where you stand with regard to Bianca."

"Bianca?" He frowned. "What has she to do with this?"

"Everything. Francisco has begun arrangements for her betrothal and subsequent marriage."

"So that's why you're here." The realization dawned.

Her face drained of expression and she stared past him into a far corner of the room. "You will recall the stranger I spoke of, the man who came to the house making inquires about your reckless companion? It is he that Francisco has chosen."

"A total stranger? Isn't this rather sudden?"

"Quite obviously his powers of persuasion are second only to his status and wealth. Our father is impressed by this gentleman, and I must add that Francisco is not easily impressed. I, on the other hand, do not trust this man or his motives."

"After all these years of head-strong determination you're willing to relinquish everything to me in order to protect your sister."

Anger sparked in the moss green eyes and she snapped, "I relinquish *nothing.* I assure you, *Signore*, despite any marriage contract Francisco may contrive, you will find me more than a formidable opponent if you seek to endanger our inheritance."

"Hold up there." He held out his hands. "I was paying you a compliment not threatening you."

"The decision is yours to make." She abruptly rose and smoothed the folds of her frock. "I shall take my leave." She turned and marched toward the door.

"Antonia, please." He reached for her arm and forestalled her departure. "Please don't think me callous, I respect your motives, but I can't possibly accept your offer. There are reasons."

"Think about it, Niccolo. I offer all that I possess."

"In exchange for Bianca's happiness?"

The young woman looked away. "With Francisco's passing, such decisions will fall to the head of the household." Her eyes rose and locked

with his. "If that is you, the decision concerning who she will marry or whether she will marry at all, will fall upon your shoulders. I assure you that is no small responsibility."

"Antonia, I—"

She pulled free from his grasp. "Think about it."

In a whirl of skirts, she whisked through the door and disappeared down the hall.

OOOOO

"Marriage! In a dress no less." Montague tossed his cloak to a stool and sat on the edge of the bed. "It solves everything."

"It's out of the question and you know it."

"Niccolo, it's the perfect solution. You'll virtually control del Fiore silk, but even more importantly, Bianca will be free to marry whomever she pleases."

"You can't possibly be suggesting that I accept this woman's proposal," he gasped in shock.

"I suppose you're right." The young man sighed with defeat. "I wouldn't wish Antonia on my worst enemy, much less a friend, dress or no dress."

"It's not the young lady's caliber nor appearance that's in question. In fact, she's rather pretty. It's a question of *what I am*."

"She's offering a marriage of convenience not a love match. Such marriages make up the bulk of the aristocracy of this city and you know it."

"I cannot; I would not deceive her or any other woman in such a manner, ever." His usually mild features darkened with anger. "Such a ruse would be reprehensible."

"I'm sorry." The words slipped from his lips. "I can't believe that I've become desperate enough to suggest such a thing."

"We all get desperate sometimes." Nicholas crossed the room to his friend's side. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing more that I can do. There's something you should know. Francisco is arranging Bianca's betrothal."

Montague's eyes grew wide.

"To the man who followed you here from Nice."

"The fiend!" He sprang to his feet in horror.

"Have you spoken with the man, reconciled your differences?"

"I've been unable to locate him. This can't be true, tell me it isn't." He grabbed Nicholas' arm, his eyes desperate. "This can't be happening."

"Do you believe this man is doing this as an act of revenge?"

"The man would be a fool not to jump at the chance to marry Bianca. But it isn't my beloved the bastard wants." He seized his cloak and dashed for the door. "I have to go!"

OOOOO

Dusk beckoned; its whisper rustled in the back of Nicholas' sleeping mind and summoned the vampire to full awareness of the world around him.

A mortal was near!

His eyes snapped open.

Montague was standing over him, his face etched by the waning light of day's demise, his expression unreadable.

"What's wrong?" Nicholas sat up, momentarily unsettled as he fought the vestiges of day's hold on his mind and body. "Did you find him?"

The mortal stood studying him without comment.

An uncanny silence filled the room.

"Montague?" Nicholas found himself strangely unnerved despite his relationship with the young man. In a century and a half of immortality he'd never been caught in such a position of vulnerability. Each and every day he slept soundly, without trepidation, in the presence of a mortal, and until this moment he'd given it no thought. Now that mortal was standing over him, studying the vampire as if he were a separate species.

A dangerous species.

The man's eyes slowly passed over him.

"Montague, if something's wrong..."

The young man turned and walked away.

OOOOO

A pair of dark eyes watched from the shadows.

The crowd roared as the troop of brilliantly-clad young men tumbled and leaped, caught and tossed one another in an agile array of antics.

Across the moonlit *piazza*, beneath a velvet sky, their colorful plumes rustled in the warm night air; their energy was boundless. They drained vigor from the adoration of strangers. The young men frolicked for the pleasure of a sea of nameless faces...

Yellow, scarlet, fuchsia, royal — color swam against the backdrop of night, a blur of endless motion. Laughter rippled through the air.

Applause. A chorus of cheers.

The dark eyes passed over the troop, each in turn, they came to rest upon a handsome young man; his dark hair glistened with sweat against his pale brow, a yellow cap rested at an angle atop his curls.

The eyes lingered.

OOOOO

Nicholas sensed a sudden chill, almost missed his mark; his vampiric agility salvaged the flip that he went on to execute with flawless precision and no one noticed.

He paused, turned and scanned the crowd.

Nothing.

OOOOO

Something was wrong.

Nicholas sensed it from the moment he opened his eyes.

Dawn's purple light still hours away crept along the blinds, seeped into the room and back-lit the silhouette of the young man who abruptly sat up in bed and dropped his face into his hands.

"Montague?" Nicholas rose from the bench where he'd earlier retired and crossed the room. His companion did not raise his head as he approached and his concern grew. "Are you all right?"

A ragged intake of breath cut the air.

He slipped onto the bed at the man's side, rested a hand on his shoulder; it trembled beneath his touch. A frown marred his brow. The mortal had been sleeping soundly, he was certain of that. A nightmare, perhaps?

A memory?

He knew, only too well, how consuming such things could be, how they absorbed the light of reason and reality. He sought to comfort the

man with a touch, to draw him into the security of the present. "Montague—?"

"What was it like?" he suddenly rasped.

"I don't understand."

"For you when the creature, you know." He lifted his face toward the light, sweat beaded across his pale brow. "The creature who made you. He? She? What was it like, the experience?"

He gasped in shock. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Tell me...please." He grasped the vampire's arm and held tight. His eyes beseeched. "What was it like?"

"It was a 'he,' and we really shouldn't be discussing this."

"I must know." The young man trembled; his violet eyes lay sunken among the chiseled bones of his face; they held a haunted look. "What did you *feel*?"

Nicholas looked away, unable to believe the man was demanding to know such a thing. "I really can't describe it. Why are you asking me this?"

"God, I must be mad." Montague dropped his head into his hands, tangled locks of raven hair cast his face in shadows.

"What has happened to make you ask me such things? Surely it is not your desire to become what I am—"

"Never!" The word ripped from his lips. "But I must know what it was like for you when...he took you."

"I'm powerless to answer," he relented softly, confused but compassionate toward the mortal's plight. He leaned back against the headboard, drew his legs onto the bed and rested his hand on Montague's shoulder. "Some experiences transcend the boundaries of mere language, they ascend into a realm of pure feeling and emotion for which no words suffice."

"Were you lovers?"

"No!" he gasped in shock.

"Forgive my bluntness but I had to know, to understand. This creature, he—"

"—Is as a brother, a father to me. He is both my master and my mentor."

"But he has never demanded—"

"Never."

The word chilled the sudden silence of the room and Montague looked away, stared toward the shifting shadows of dawn's advance as

they etched the stark frame of the bench resting near the hearth, drew it into a cold, spindly silhouette. "I didn't mean to offend you, Niccolo; I'm sorry."

Nicholas drew a deep breath and held it. "You didn't. It's just that," he shrugged. "No one's ever asked me such a question."

"You say he's your master, this creature?"

"Yes. The one who brings you across holds you in his dominion if he so chooses."

"From which there is no escape?"

The vampire frowned. "I've never considered escape. We disagree at times, but I cannot conceive of possessing such a desire. We're a family."

The young man drew a ragged breath and pulled his thoughts inward. "But if he 'holds you in his dominion' is there nothing he could not demand if he desires?"

He considered the man's words in silence; it was a disturbing concept he hadn't fully considered.

"Haven't you relinquished everything?" the man beseeched. "Could he not demand that you submit to all manner of indignities or advances—"

"*He would not,"* The young vampire stated firmly; the very thought chilled his soul. "As I've said, we disagree at times, but he has never sought to erode the core of my existence, who and what I am."

The man shuddered and looked away.

"Why are you asking me these things?"

"I must be mad, twisted and demented!" he cried out in anguish.

"Montague, what's wrong?" He gripped the mortal's arm.

The young man raised his eyes, misery swam in their depths. "I *enjoyed* it."

OOOOOO

The shadows lengthened, their tentacles traced patterns over the silent forms reclined upon the bed, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

"You have to tell me what this is about." Nicholas dispersed the hush.

The man pulled in his breath and released it as a sigh. "I must be sick to have experienced such...arousal."

"The vampire, the one you once spoke of, this is about him, isn't it?"

Montague dropped his face into his hands and moaned. "He's here; I sense it, if such a thing is possible."

"It is." Nicholas' voice fell to a whisper. "If there has been physical contact between the two of you, it's possible that a bond has been formed."

"Contact," he repeated dryly; his voice echoed with a hollow sound. "You mean intimacy, don't you?"

"Such contact takes many forms. Without knowing the full story I can't really say. There aren't any gambling debts, are there?" he said bluntly. "And there's no man from Nice."

Montague shook his head. "I'm sorry for lying to you, Niccolo, but I didn't want to involve you in this."

"Who better than I?" He lightly rested his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Besides, we're friends and you can't imagine how long it's been since I've said such a thing to anyone." He looked deeply into the mortal's face. "But you have to tell me the facts."

"There's really nothing to tell."

"This vampire's stalking you for some reason; how long have you known of his existence?"

"Always."

"Always?" He frowned in confusion. "I don't understand."

"There has never been a time that I haven't known of his existence. From my earliest memories he has been a part of our lives."

He listened on in silence, holding a million questions at bay with an effort as the young man continued his story.

"I told you of our impoverishment. When my mother decided to keep me and to raise me on her own, her family disowned her — completely. We would have perished, starved, without doubt, had it not been for our benefactor. Though we seldom saw him, he was a constant in our lives. The provisions he provided kept us alive. I've no doubt he would have offered more but my mother would accept only the barest of essentials; and those, only for my benefit."

"A vampire provided your family with *food,"* he interrupted, unable to restrain his astonishment. "Why?"

"I never knew why. But I was unaware of his true nature until much later; I'm certain my mother never knew the truth. It wasn't until I became an adult, when he revealed himself to me, that he began to..." He shuddered and turned away.

"He fed from you?"

"Is that what you call it?" The young man responded; his tone flat and without inflection. "Somehow it seemed much more than that."

"It can be," Nicholas told him softly. "Do you believe this vampire's advances were intended to be intimate?"

Montague allowed his head to roll back against the headboard of the bed and stared toward the scattered shadows of dawn's advance as light filtered around the edges of the blinds and painted the room in dusty hues. His voice rose with chilling clarity as he continued. "He seemed to relish my arousal as much as my blood, if that answers your question. I've never experienced such intensity. God, it sickens me to admit it, but even as I fought him the ecstasy enslaved my entire being."

"It is all encompassing," He breathed with understanding. "We are drawn to the warmth, the vitality of mortals as much as to their blood. It is a level of intimacy which cannot be achieved between two of our own kind. Unfortunately, the end result is not always pleasant for the mortal involved."

"He took me to Paris, showed me things I'd only dreamed of. I had no inkling of his true intentions." He grabbed Nicholas' arm and stared into his face with sudden intensity. "You must believe me, Niccolo, never once did I submit to his advances. No matter what methods he employed to entice or persuade me, I fought him; I swear it, as god is my witness."

Nicholas swallowed hard, shaken by the depth of emotion burning in the violet eyes that beseeched him to believe. The mortal's sanity seemed to hinge upon the denial of acquiescence. He nodded and assured, "Of course I believe you."

Montague sighed and rolled his eyes upward to stare at the ceiling with an empty gaze. "When I first met you, I thought that, perhaps, it was the same for you and that you might understand such things."

"My experience was quite different. I was not taken by force nor was I romanced as an intended victim might be. He simply brought me across."

"Without the barest stirrings of eroticism or lust."

Nicholas pulled in his breath, held it and considered the mortal's solemn assessment in silence. Eroticism? How could such an experience be anything less than erotic, and yet, even as the master's blood had burned through his veins when he drew its eternal essence into himself, Janette's voice beckoned him from the void, her eyes melted into his and her lips glistened, ushered him into the full splendor of his regeneration into life

everlasting. His arms wrapped around her, drew her into his impassioned embrace. Janette. His eternal Janette.

Erotic?

He'd never known such ecstasy as what transpired in the hours that followed his transformation, how he loved her in ways he never imagined possible, how she urged him to feed, then, crimson still fresh upon his lips, loved him again and again, until the cycle of their passion and feeding wound itself into a circle of unending rapture. Her lips pressed to his throat and his to hers, her skirts crumpled to her waist, her legs wrapped around his hips; their moans rose and fell in rhythm to their primal lusts. Whether LaCroix faded from the room or stayed as his children loved one another, mattered to none of the trio. The master's essence had taken root, deep into the soil of his being, had encompassed him in the chilling-warmth of who and what they now were and eternally would remain — Family.

A smile whispered over his lips at the memory.

If Janette had not been a quintessential element of their unholy trinity, would his relationship to the master vampire have resembled Montague's entanglement with the creature who sought to possess him? Such a thought never occurred to the young vampire, but realizing its absurdity he forced it to the back of his mind. LaCroix often chuckled at the cornucopia of vices life offered mortals and vampires alike as he declared with enthusiasm, *"Sua cuique sunt vitia!"* The ancient vampire was not a creature accustomed to denial, therefore it was safe to assume, had it been his desire to possess his young protégé, he would have done so long ago — regardless of consent.

"Fields of flowers caressed beneath the summer sun."

The mortal's words wove into the pattern of his thoughts. He turned and found Montague staring wistfully at the lavender light as it played across the ceiling, the shifting patterns it created along the web of cracks and peeling plaster...

"Sunsets, and the impassioned embrace of a woman's arms. Bianca. Her lips. A family. Children." The man's voice fell to a whisper. "I want these things. I want my *life,* but he intends to make me into what you are." He turned and faced the vampire; the light brushed over his face, his cheeks, the wisp of hair fallen with disregard across his brow, eyes that suddenly glistened with unshed pain as the words tore from his lips, "I would rather die!"

"Choice."

"The concept seems important to you," LaCroix responded with indifference, turned and walked away.

Nicholas pursued him across the elaborately embroidered rug embellishing the floor of the apartments overlooking the canal, approached his back and insisted again, "You gave me a choice."

"Did I?"

"Of course you did; you offered me the gift and I accepted."

"Indeed you did." He turned and faced his protégé; a smile hinted at the edges of his pale lips. "Therefore, we shall never truly know if the choice was yours to make, will we?"

Nicholas frowned in confusion.

LaCroix chucked softly and started to walk away.

The young vampire grabbed his arm. "Consent freely given; it's a code of moral ethics, of honor."

"Is it?"

"You taught me that it is," he rasped with conviction. "What this creature intends to do is wrong!"

"What this creature intends to do is none of your business, Nicholas," the master vampire responded firmly. "You are interfering in matters that do not concern you. If this vampire has claimed your pathetic street urchin; if he has caught the scent, savored the flavor of his intended, he will stalk him throughout all eternity, if necessary, to consummate that claim. It is not your place to meddle in affairs of this nature; our kind will not tolerate it."

"Stalk him like an animal in pursuit of its quarry?"

"Like a vampire in pursuit of what he has claimed as rightfully his. Trust me, there is no more relentless creature on this earth nor one more dangerous, than one of our kind enamored by such a pursuit." His eyes passed slowly over Nicholas where they lingered. "I know of what I speak."

"You never *stalked* me."

A smile taunted from the depths of his ice-blue eyes. "Really?"

The young vampire shivered despite the warmth of the room and looked away.

"Leave this matter to follow its natural course, Nicholas."

"There is nothing natural about any of this." He threw up his hands in outrage. "Montague doesn't want to be one of us. He wants his life and this fiend intends to brutally rob him of it."

"It is not your place to decide the fate of others—"

"He's my friend!"

"He is a mortal; they are lunch. I've permitted this foolishness to go on long enough. To your own detriment, I've been entirely too permissive with you. It's time for you to come home."

"I will not."

A chilling silence gripped the room. LaCroix's eyes pinned the young vampire and the two stood frozen in dead-lock.

"LaCroix, you must help me...please." He broke the silence with a plea.

"My advice to you, my meddlesome one, is to forget this nonsense. Accept *Signorina* del Fiore's offer of a union of convenience, the prestige and power such a position will afford, the intrigue it will lend to this season's Champagne Fairs. Imagine the exhilaration such a ruse would entail. If savored correctly, a creature with such fire as she might linger on for months, and she would hardly be the first young bride to succumb to the tragic consequences of a mysterious wasting malady. Now that's a melodrama I should be much more interested in watching unfold than this pitifully doomed tale of woe."

Nicholas gasped in surprise. "You know of Antonia's offer?"

"Your underestimation pains me." He slowly shook his head. "When will you learn there are no secrets between us nor can there ever be. Do you truly believe that I've been oblivious to your amusing antics these past few weeks? Accept the head-strong female's proposal. *Signore* del Fiore's demise is imminent, the man fairly reeks of death's looming advance. His fortune will be yours to squander for a season; his daughters, tender delicacies for us to nibble as midnight snacks."

"You speak of games while a man's life hangs in the balance!"

"His life?" The master vampire frowned. "Did you not state it was eternal life this being was offering your friend? Can any greater gift be granted than this? Yet you speak as if he were doomed. You will not interfere in the affairs of this vampire or his family. The matter is settled."

"I won't stand by and—"

"I know this creature and he will not tolerate your meddling. He is ancient and unrelenting. Were it not for my presence, he would gleefully dismember you and settle back to enjoy the spectacle as your limbs struggled

to reattach themselves. Trust me, this threat is not an idle one; Thomas and I enjoyed such sport in Rome, centuries before your conception was even a stirring in the loins of your ancestors."

"You know this monster?"

"He is no more a monster than I, if you choose to view me as such. We understand one another, respect one another's claims and families. Such boundaries are essential when one considers the consequences of eternal conflict. We have maintained this amicable status-quo for centuries. You will do nothing to disrupt it."

"If you know this Thomas, go to him and reason with him."

"I shall do nothing of the sort. The matter is settled."

"But this is wrong, you know that it is." He grabbed the vampire's arm. "Montague deserves a choice just as you granted to me."

"How I conduct my affairs is not contingent upon how any other vampire chooses to conduct his. You will learn as the centuries pass the futility of attempting to effect change upon those who are changeless."

"He doesn't want this, LaCroix. He wants Bianca del Fiore; he wants a marriage, children, not eternal enslavement to this creature's lusts."

"Is that what this represents to you?" LaCroix's voice fell to an icy whisper. "Eternal enslavement? Is that how you perceive the gift I've offered, no less than damnation?"

"Of course not." The words fell from his lips; his eyes sought the master's face. "This is my home, my family. I would have it no other way. But the choice was mine to make, it was not forced upon me by some fiend."

"You do not perceive me as such?"

Something stirred beyond the depths of the ancient vampire's eyes, something that compelled Nicholas near. "How could you ask such a thing?" he gasped. "You have granted me life-everlasting, guidance and wisdom. I could never view you as a creature who would seek to strip me of my dignity or freewill."

"Truly?" Laughter rumbled deep in his chest then he stood for a moment in stoic silence and studied his creation. Candlelight played across the flaxen hair, bewilderment clouded the vibrant blue eyes. Reaching out, he rested his fingertips against a fair cheek.

Nicholas gave a start but didn't pull away.

"Things change, *mon enfant*." His voice echoed into the stillness of the room.

"I don't understand—"

Light caught the silver glimmer of a ring upon the alabaster hand that lashed out, sending him sprawling to the floor...

Shaken, Nicholas looked up at the marble silhouette towering above him. Words caught in his throat; choked him into stunned silence...

"Things change."

OOOOO

"Your children are exquisite, Lucius. You've chosen well."

"Of course."

"But, then, you always possessed a discriminating eye for symmetry and balance. The juxtaposition of light and dark, one child the visual antithesis of the other; they create a charming harmony, don't you agree?"

"My creations are as flawless in form as they are eternal." LaCroix's eyes grew narrow and locked on the presence lingering in the shadows of the balcony. Moonlight etched the intruder's face into a stark oval, his dark eyes into fathomless pools that absorbed the light. "You didn't come here to laud my tastes with regard to my chosen ones. You have a purpose, Thomas?"

"Ever the conquering *triumphator,* poised and unbowed." The vampire moved from the shadows into the light that pooled over the balcony to the canal below where it glistened upon the waters of the Adriatic that lapped the pillars beneath them. "Have you no proper greeting for your old friend after centuries of parting? Where are the ancient rites of hospitality that compelled a general to offer all the comforts and delights his abode possessed? The finest wine to savor, at least until one was too drunken to notice an inferior substitution, and the unrestrained lavishness of pleasure bestowed upon him by the free use of both servants and slaves alike?"

"I possess neither servants nor slaves. So it seems you must satiate your lusts elsewhere."

"Really?" The dark eyes glimmered. "What of your young one? Surely you would not be opposed to my borrowing him for a season; for old time's sake?"

LaCroix face hardened into granite. "I do not treat my offspring as common *saltatrix tonsa.*"

"So goes the decline of civilization."

"True civilization went the way of indoor aqueducts and heated baths. Perhaps you slept through that charming little interlude we called The Dark Ages."

"I only wish." Thomas Achaeus Maximus drifted near. "It is amazing to me how fragile the minds of these mortals are; how a millennia of advancement and culture could be so easily eradicated from their brains. Only now are they beginning to rediscover the fundamentals of true thought, the basics of Gaius Sergius Orata's aqueduct systems. And they are arrogant enough to declare it the dawn of a new era when it is simply the resurrection of the old."

"Personally, I blame the Christians." LaCroix shrugged. "They plunged civilization into the sanctimonious chaos of self-flagellation. Gone are the quaint afternoons whiled away beneath the brilliant canopy of the coliseum, the bloodied, tattered remains of those who reveled in their martyrdom, much to our delight; we were so accommodating in that regard, one would think they would be grateful. But enough of these pleasantries, what possessed you to darken my doorstep?"

"I believe you know the answer to that. Your golden child is threatening to interfere in matters that do not concern him. Thus far, I have been lenient, but if I discover he is savoring the nectar that is rightfully mine, I shall not be so tolerant."

"I can assure you, my Nicholas entertains no such intentions. He is, unfortunately, enamored by all things mortal. Your tidbit is no exception, but his predilections lie elsewhere. He has befriended this pitiful creature and is intent upon preserving him from your licentious advances. Alas, he still struggles beneath the moral yoke, the rites of courtly valor that infirm those who practice gallantry as a religion. These are no more than lingering vestiges of his past life; he is young, in time the tethers shall rot away."

Thomas' face grew dark, etched into hardened lines by shadows. "Montague is mine. From the moment of his conception he has been destined to succumb to the eternity of my embrace. I have watched him, waited, savored the moments as he grew strong and fair. Soon he will reach the prime of his youth and beauty. When the season is ripe, I shall claim him in the fullness of his splendor so that his eternal form will be retained at the pinnacle of its perfection. If your fledgling does anything to interfere with Montague's destiny—"

"He will not," LaCroix responded firmly. "Nicholas and I 'discussed' the issue at length earlier this evening, and although our dialogue may have added a new dimension to our relationship, it is doubtful that I shall be forced to repeat myself."

"As I recall, your *discussions* can be quite convincing. And I am not referring to the eloquence with which you mastered the art of oratory

beneath my father's consummate tutelage, nor the fluidity with which you addressed both patricians and plebeians alike on the steps of the Senate. I don't suppose you are quite so loquacious these days."

"Nicholas understands the consequences of disobedience."

"Let us hope so. The young mortal is volatile right now; creatures such as he are so easily overwhelmed by the depth of intensity our existence offers. He requires time to accept his fate, the full splendor of his own destined nobility. He will return to me, to the majesty of what my embrace entails. I am the only father he has ever known. I trust you understand such things."

LaCroix maintained a stoic silence; a pillar poised beneath the cool moonlight. A gondola swept past below and the rhythm of the water's caress rose to fill the hush.

"On the outskirts of Marseilles, along a deserted roadway, dusk barely descending, I found her. Crumpled and dying, ravaged by her fellow mortals and abandoned as refuse when their task was complete; her life's essence flowed from her lacerated body, a violet-eyed beauty with golden hair, near to drawing her final breath. I sought to quench my thirst and perhaps to comfort her demise. Her blood was rich and full-bodied despite her waning life-force and it enthralled my senses...

That's when I felt him.

Deep within the recesses of her battered form, crying out to me, struggling for his existence. I have never touched such a life-force before nor since, and how it was possible I shall never know but I knew he was there."

"The woman was pregnant?" Despite himself, LaCroix was fascinated and he moved near to study the other vampire's face cloaked in shadows as clouds passed over the moon.

"Mere hours from conception his spirit cried out to me. And from that instant, he was eternally mine. I gathered her from the ditch and delivered her into the arms of her family. But for my intervention, she would have died where those noble knights abandoned her. Instead, she flourished and the child survived. He is mine and I will not be denied the consummation of my triumph."

"Were you not given to stoicism of thought, I would disregard your tale as jest. Many such women have succumb to my embrace but never have I sensed the faintest inking of a presence within their gestated wombs."

"Its truth is not contingent upon your belief, Lucius; Montague is mine. I will not tolerate interference from your meddlesome offspring. I trust we understand one another."

LaCroix's eyes locked upon Thomas and silence fell between the ancient vampires. "Nicholas and his amusing idiosyncrasies are my concern." His words fell into the void with chilling resolve. "Touch him with *any* intentions, and we shall have much to *discuss*." A smile froze his lips. "I trust we understand one another."

OOOOO

"Your decision is final; I cannot persuade you otherwise, *Signore* Niccolo?"

"I'm sorry, Antonia, but my answer must remain, no. To enter into such a marriage contract with you, even one intended as a union of 'convenience' would be dishonest."

Her eyes hardened with resolve. Gone was the plain, feminine frock she'd worn to the apartment days before; once again, her petite frame was swallowed by a coarse tunic, britches tied at the waist by a leather cord. The couple paused along the cobblestone path leading toward the pond; it glistened in the distance amidst manicured hedges and marble statues.

"I am nothing if not determined." The young woman broke the silence. "It has never been said that I am soft or relenting in the acquisition of my goals."

"Is that what I've become, *Signorina,* a goal?"

Her cheeks flushed with color and she looked past him toward one of the fountains; her eyes caught the water's glisten. "I'm sorry. That was callous of me."

"You're trying to protect everything that's dear to you, your desperation is understandable."

"You have no idea what it's like to be viewed as common chattel." She stomped her foot in outrage. "Delivered like goods to the highest bidder. I'm perfectly capable of controlling our family's affairs without the assistance of an outsider."

"Of that, I have no doubt." His eyes passed over her petite but sturdy frame and a smile tipped the corner of his lips. Her determination was a trait he could not help but admire.

She huffed and continued down the path, coming to a stop at the edge of the pond next to a marble bench, she turned and faced him with a

grim expression. "With all that I have offered to sway you only a fool would walk away."

"I have my reasons."

"Is it me?" She asked bluntly then continued on before he could reply, "If so, I've prepared another offer."

"I assure you, that is not the case." Even now, her aroma rose to entice his senses and he fought to quell the images it evoked of bodies entwined beneath the pale moon...

"Bianca."

"Excuse me?" He frowned, torn from his thoughts.

"I offer you my sister."

Words escaped him and he stood in a stupor.

"Better you than the prospect Francisco has selected. No man could resist such an offer. All of del Fiore's wealth and the fairest of his daughters. Her beauty is without equal. Imagine what it would mean to possess her as your own, in your arms, your bed. She would submit without—"

He pulled the young woman into his arms and sought the moistness of her mouth with his. She gasped, melted into his embrace. The musk of her blood-scent rose to encompassed him; cinnamon mingled into the whisper of honeysuckle and roses that wafted on the breeze. He crushed her close; his lips brushed over her cheek, down to the gentle sway of her throat next to the coarse collar of her tunic. Infuriating, its fibers irritated his skin; he seized the cloth and ripped. She gasped but did not resist as he dipped his head and pressed his lips against her throat. His tongue tasted the supple flesh, relished the flavor, the aroma uniquely hers. Attraction encompassed so much more than simply the physical as mortals perceived it; the scent, the taste of a woman coalesced to create her own unique allure.

His tongue caressed her flesh; his breath grew ragged and he clutched her tiny frame to his body, feared that she might break, yet knew by virtue of spirit alone the feisty young woman could withstand his embrace.

Her arms wrapped around him; her head rolled back, eyes closed as she relished the stroke of his tongue against her throat, the bizarre yet enticing method of his intimate advance. Her sighs rose, mingled with his and she submitted to the passion.

Her blood-scent beckoned; the beast grew amber in his eyes and his body quaked as lust claimed reason and he buried his cheek into the softness of her neck, followed by his lips, his tongue; and as they grew erect, he teased the tender flesh, barely brushed it with his fangs. He trembled

with anticipation, the restrained arousal spawned by cinnamon lingering just beyond his grasp...

She moaned and clutched him near; her body yielded to be claimed...

Tenderly, he pricked the flesh; scarlet, it glistened against her skin, taunted. He sighed with passion and touched it with the tip of his tongue; its bouquet danced across his senses. A rumble grew deep within his throat and he lapped the crimson trail, greedily, hungrily, the tiny creature crushed in his embrace.

His head began to swim and a smile tipped the edges of his full, sensuous mouth. He sighed, absorbed the beast, and when her hands began to roam with demands of their own, he pushed free.

His fingers caressed the pale oval of her face, tilted it up to meet his gaze; moonlight swam in the moss green eyes. He smiled, his arousal unsated yet teased into a smoldering contentment by the richness of her blood. No more, he would take no more...

He sighed.

"Niccolo?"

"A platonic union?" He laughed and drew her near to rest against his chest. "For a creature of such fortitude and intelligence you're surprisingly naive; to be so painfully unaware of your own aura of allure."

"Then your answer?"

His hand cupped her chin, raised her head; his fingers lightly stroked the boyish locks cropped to frame her face. LaCroix wanted this ridiculous union to be consummated despite its inevitable consequences. The young vampire's face darkened with anger at the memory of their earlier confrontation; in his heart he knew his relationship to the master vampire would never be the same. Upon his induction into Knighthood, Sir Baldulf, an elder knight, struck his cheek with the flat of his sword, a blow that almost sent the young man reeling. It was the final act of submission a knight would ever be forced to endure without retaliation...

A true knight would never tolerate another such violation.

Nicholas was no longer a knight. "My decision remains unchanged," he told the young woman.

"But you desire me—"

He pressed his fingers to her lips and breathed, "In ways you cannot possibly imagine. But your destiny lies elsewhere. My passion would only rob you of the future that is rightfully yours to embrace."

A frown marred her brow and she stepped from his arms...

A scattering of clouds washed across the moon, cast the garden into shades of gray...

She turned and walked away.

OOOOO

The apartment lay in shambles, benches and stools overturned...

Nicholas froze in the doorway.

Moonlight spilled through the open window and illuminated the two forms huddled in a far corner. Light caught the unmistakable waves of raven hair — Montague. The other presence was a stranger but an aura of power and age struck the young vampire with a sudden chill and though he willed his feet to move forward, he stood frozen.

Clutched in the creature's embrace, the mortal's impassioned moans rose and filled the room. The scent of blood salted with musk wafted through the air. The vampire raised his head, eyes crimson, fangs glistening, and locked gazes with Nicholas in the doorway. The mortal slumped in his embrace and lay trembling against his chest. A smile twisted the vampire's lips, taunted.

Nicholas fought to move toward them, cursed his weakness when his feet refused to respond to his command.

In an instant, the vampire was gone. Montague swayed, regained his balance and stumbled to the bed, sank to the corner and dropped his face into his hands. Nicholas rushed to his side and reached for his shoulder but the man pulled away.

"Leave me."

"Montague, we have to leave this place, get out of the city."

"Have you lost your mind?" The man raised his eyes, misery swam in their depths. "He will only follow us; he always follows. And if the creature who created you is anything like him..." He shuddered and turned away. "You are as much a prisoner as I."

Nicholas caught his breath. Days ago he would have argued with the young man, but a cold certainty chilled him to the core — Montague was right. "We must leave now!" He grabbed his arm.

"Please...don't touch me." He pulled free, turned from the light, and shadows claimed the expression of self-loathing on his face. He covered the crimson marks still fresh upon his neck. "Leave me."

Nicholas wanted to argue, to offer words of solace or assurances of hope, but the lies withered and died on his lips and he sat in silence.

Night's embrace shrouded his companion in dusky hues, his shoulders stooped, his expression concealed by shadows.

"If you're truly my friend, you'll spare me what remains of my dignity."

Reluctantly, Nicholas stood, moved across the room toward the silent hearth, righted the overturned bench and settled onto it.

"I've lost the will to deny him." The man's words echoed with a hollow sound through the hush. "The passion, the lust. It sickens me but I crave what he's doing to me. I'm powerless against it." He shuddered and rolled back on the bed, curled onto his side and faced the cool light of the moon that spilled through the window. "If you joined me now, I would be powerless to deny even your embrace."

Nicholas sat quietly in the shadows.

"I loved him, you know. You have no idea what it's like to care so deeply for someone only to be so bitterly betrayed." The man's words trailed to silence and the muffled sound of his breathing rose to fill the void.

Betrayed? The vampire squeezed his eyes shut. His mind burned with the memory of a rain of blows dealt by a marble hand, the light as it glimmered against a silver ring...

OOOOO

"When I submit to him, I know my Bianca is safe. He entertains no intentions toward her." Montague turned and gazed at the blush of fuchsia settling over the horizon, the waning light as it caressed the domes of St. Mark's and cast the bronze horses in its glow.

"We have to leave Venice; we can go together." Resolve hardened Nicholas' tone. It deepened the hue of his eyes that caught the last of day's dying light, the full extent of such light the vampire could endure. "I'm not returning to LaCroix."

The man caught his companion's gaze and solemnly shook his head. "I can't let you do that, Niccolo. I'd be endangering not only Bianca, but you as well. You and I both know the creature who created you will never let you go. I have to stay in Venice and see this thing though."

Nicholas turned his face toward the glow of day's retreat. The deepening purple that bled into blue then upward into velvet black. The familiar etch of the moon's pale shadow. A sprinkling of stars danced above the rooftops. He couldn't help but wonder what Venice looked like beneath

the warm summer sun. The waters of the Adriatic that fed the Grand Canal, were they blue or inky black? "We must *leave,* now, before it's too late." The words tore from his soul with a depth of feeling he was surprised to discover he possessed.

"My decision is final." A smile brightened the young man's face, belying the sobriety of his words. He slapped his friend's shoulder with the ease of relaxed familiarity. "Besides, we've got a performance later tonight and all of Venice knows, you guys would be a flop without me."

A smile lightly eased the tension of Nicholas' lips and softened the pale glow of his eternally youthful face. He opened his mouth to reply when he sensed the presence of a mortal, paused and turned toward the source.

Dusk's descending light caught the form that drifted from the shadows and moved toward them. The short hair framing the pale, oval face, intense eyes that caught and held Nicholas' gaze.

"Antonia?" He rose to his feet. "Is something wrong?"

The young woman shook her head. Her stern gaze fell on Nicholas' companion and lingered. Montague grew uneasy beneath her solemn stare and he started to snap a retort when the woman interrupted. "I've come to bring you something."

He frowned in confusion. "I don't understand—"

A second presence emerged from the darkness. Shrouded in black, her flaxen hair concealed beneath a hood, her cheeks blushed with excitement, she raced toward Montague and flung herself into his arms.

"Bianca!"

OOOOO

"Why are you taunting us like this?" Montague crushed his beloved to his chest, pushed the hood from her face and buried his cheek into the golden locks. "Do you enjoy torturing us?"

Antonia's lips pressed into a thin line of annoyance. "Do you or do you not want my sister?"

The couple broke apart and stared at her with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"What's this about?" Nicholas spoke up.

"I do not trust *Signore* Thomas' motives nor intentions. I would much rather relinquish my Bianca to this rogue." She dipped her head in Montague's direction.

Montague gasped in astonishment and crushed Bianca near. "What are you saying?"

"If your intention is to wed my sister, I shall help you escape the city and Francisco's wrath."

Color drained from the young man's face.

"Are you serious?" Nicholas moved to her side. "Francisco would surely follow, his men—"

"He will never think to look for them where I intend to take them." Her tone hardened with resolve. "Into the very bosom of our family's oldest rivals, the Deveno's of Florence. They will be wed and settled long before Francisco discovers the truth, and Maximilian Deveno will be more than happy to comply with such a scheme at my father's expense."

"Francisco will disown her." Montague protested. "She will lose all that she has ever known and loved."

"Is it her inheritance you desire, *Signore*?" She locked him with a steely gaze.

"Of course not," he snapped. "But I can't selfishly subject her to a life of poverty. It was my intention to establish myself before taking her as my bride."

"The dye is cast," she retorted stiffly. "You should have considered those factors sooner. Regardless, *Signore* Deveno has agreed to offer you an apprenticeship with his guild, and if you prove yourself worthy, I'm certain he will deal fairly with you. The decision is yours and time is wasting."

"The decision is made. You know that I want her!"

"Then we leave tonight." She reached for Bianca, snatched her from the young man's arms. "I'll secure horses and we'll meet you at midnight. Francisco will never suspect the truth until we are long gone."

"Antonia?" Montague caught the woman's eyes, his own deep with gratitude. "Why?"

"Never doubt that I love my sister. And if you ever dare to harm her, you'll have me to deal with." Her tone was firm, but dusk's lingering glow softened her lips into a subtle smile. "Besides, it would be a crime for another man to raise your child."

OOOOO

"I should be ashamed of myself, shouldn't I?"

"Probably."

Montague burst into an ear-splitting grin and threw his arms around Nicholas. "Can you believe it!"

"It was bound to happen sooner or later." A smile tempted Nicholas' lips before he broke into a grin that mirrored his companion's. "I take this to mean you're willing to risk fleeing the city."

"If you'll come with us, my friend, I know we'll stand a chance. He thinks that he's beaten me, that I've surrendered all hope, and until this moment I had. He won't be expecting this."

"There's no guarantee that he won't be able to track you."

"You can sense him, can't you? You would know if he was near."

"We can sense another of our kind, it's true. But he might be able to shield himself from me; it's impossible to tell."

"We have to try!"

Nicholas gave him a solemn nod. "Agreed."

"Besides." The young man beamed with pride. "Now I have a family to protect."

OOOOO

The horses were restless; they pawed the ground with their hooves and shifted with unease. The sensitivity of such creatures was impossible to predict. Nicholas cast his companion a look and leaned near to whisper, "Maybe you three should go on without me."

"Never," Montague hissed. "We go together or not at all." He tightly gripped the reigns of one of the three mounts and motioned Bianca to his side.

The young woman, dressed in drab britches and a lose-fitting tunic that mirrored her sister's unconventional clothes, stepped away from Antonia and joined her lover.

Antonia moved from the shadows and fixed her eyes on the couple. She slowly shook her head. "I knew that it would come to this sooner or later. We should all be horsewhipped for such foolishness."

Montague grinned in spite of himself and crushed Bianca close.

"I'm entrusting her to your care, Niccolo." She turned and faced Nicholas.

He frowned in confusion.

"I'm not coming with you. *Signore* Deveno will be expecting them, and I'm trusting you to deliver her safely. If I am not discovered missing,

Francisco will never suspect my involvement nor their destination. He will simply assume the rogue has abducted her. It's best this way."

He gave her a solemn nod. "Your sister will be safe with us."

"If I had any doubts—" She bridged the distance between them, tilted her chin up and met his eyes. The suffusion of light softened her expression. "—I would never relinquish her into your care." She reached for Bianca's arm and slipped her sister's hand into Nicholas' grasp. "See that they are properly wed."

"I shall."

"You're a strange man, Niccolo, but an honest one."

"And you, *Signorina*—" He reached for her chin, raised her face and smiled. "—possess a heart of gold."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

He leaned near and lightly pressed his lips to her forehead.

Her eyes narrowed and she stepped free, but a smile softened her mouth. "When his anger has passed and Francisco has had time to consider his actions, he will forgive Bianca, and quite possibly reconsider her inheritance. He loves her dearly; and when he learns about the child, he'll be loath to abandon it into the hands of the Deveno family."

Nicholas nodded, relinquished Bianca to Montague's out-stretched hand and smoothly mounted a steed. The horse shifted with unease beneath him but he soothed it with a touch.

"Go," she cautioned and stepped back. "Before we're missed."

He started to respond when suddenly he sensed the presence of a group of advancing men, and shouted, "You've been followed!"

The world erupted in chaos.

He flung himself to one side almost a fraction of a second too late, felt the impact as the bolt from a crossbow slammed into his shoulder and knocked him to the ground. His horse panicked and fled into the night.

"Niccolo!" Montague released his hold on Bianca and reached for his fallen friend.

"Take her and go!"

"Not without you." He pulled Nicholas to his feet.

Stunned by the impalement of the wooden arrow, he stumbled, but with Montague's support he staggered to a horse. Montague leaped onto its back and pulled his companion up behind him.

The horse bolted into the night...

OOOOO

Blood.

Montague looked down at his crimson stained hands, the angry red tip of the arrow he'd yanked from Nicholas' shoulder, and shuddered. "Those bastards meant business."

"You should have taken Bianca and fled when you had the chance."

"I couldn't just leave you like that. Something tells me, this—" His eyes locked on the arrow clutched in his fist. "—Could have done you in."

"It's wooden." Nicholas winced and looked away.

"It's over; you realize that don't you? The son of a bitch must have warned Francisco of our plans. There's no other way he could have known." Sweat glistened across Montague's brow. He sank to the ground beneath a tree and mopped his forehead with his palm. "We'll never escape now. Bianca will be guarded day and night for the rest of her life."

Night lay heavy over the silent grounds. Nicholas joined his friend and sat; moonlight filtered through the branches of the elm overhead, casting the two in muted shadows.

"I've been thinking, Niccolo, and I've reached a conclusion."

The intensity in the young man's tone alerted his concern; he turned and faced Montague. "A conclusion?"

"I want you to bring me across."

"What!"

"It's the only chance I have of fighting him. You have to help me."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this! You've struggled so long and so hard to retain your mortality. You don't want to be what I am."

"True. But the choice is no longer mine to make. He's made it clear to me; in time he'll take me, consent or no consent. If I'm like him, if I possess the powers he possesses, you and I could stand against him. We could protect Bianca and the baby if he sought retaliation against them."

"It doesn't work that way, Montague. You wouldn't possess power equal to his even if I did bring you across. He's ancient. Centuries from now you'll still be an infant in his eyes. Creatures such as he measure their existence in *millennia*."

The mortal's eyes grew wide. "I had no idea. But it changes nothing. I still want you to be the one to bring me across. You're my friend, the closest I've ever had, and I trust you with my life. Please, if it must be someone, let it be you."

Nicholas pulled a swift intake of breath. His gaze passed over the young man's face, the sincerity of the violet eyes that beseeched him to perform the ultimate act.

His friend.

"Together we can fight this fiend!" Conviction strengthened the young man's tone. "If I can't have Bianca, at least I can protect her."

Together, they could leave this wretched city, travel the world — the ages. So many wondrous things he could reveal to Montague. Places and adventures to savor...

Eternal friendship.

The vampire's heart fluttered in his chest. "I've never actually, I mean...I know how its done, but..."

"You've never done it?"

Nicholas shook his head. "I've never foreseen a reason." His voice fell to a whisper. "Until now."

"Then you'll do it."

"Is this truly what you want?"

The mortal nodded.

"You must trust me enough to return from the light." He rested his hand on his companion's arm and leaned near. "It will draw you away from me if you let it."

"I don't understand."

"You will." He closed his eyes and deeply inhaled the aroma of the young man's blood, warm and enticing it lingered just beneath the surface of his sweat-glistened skin. Its allure summoned the stirrings of the beast and his breath grew ragged as he pulled the mortal near to rest against his chest. "Friends?"

"Eternally."

He bared his fangs...

"Nicholas!"

His head snapped up; he turned and faced the silhouette looming in the shadows. "LaCroix!"

"This foolishness ends, *now!"* The master vampire lunged from the darkness, grabbed him by the neck and tore him from the mortal's embrace.

"This does not concern you!" Nicholas struggled, in vain, against the iron grip that held him immobile.

Confused and shaken, Montague stumbled to his feet and staggered back from the vampires.

LaCroix pinned him with an icy stare. "Go, while the choice is still yours to make."

The man stood frozen.

LaCroix's hand tightened on Nicholas' neck to a bone crushing grip, and he hissed against his ear, "Thomas or no Thomas, I shall drain this pathetic wretch of yours and leave his carcass to putrefy on Thomas' doorstep if this madness does not end."

"Go, Montague, or he'll destroy you!"

As if released from a spell by his friend's frantic tone, the mortal turned and fled into the darkness.

LaCroix's laughter echoed in his wake. "Destiny awaits your foolish companion."

Suddenly alarmed, he gasped, "What do you mean?"

The ancient vampire flung Nicholas aside, and he went sprawling to the ground. His eyes burned down on him, amber in the dim. "I *warned* you."

"What I do from this point on is none of your affair, LaCroix."

A chilling smile tipped the corners of the vampire's lips and he knelled at his side. Reaching out, he placed his hand against Nicholas' cheek. He cringed and fought to pull away but LaCroix seized his chin and held tight. "None of my affair?"

Nicholas glared. "What did you mean, 'destiny awaits him'?"

"Thomas has come to claim what is his; just as I shall claim what is mine." He grabbed the young vampire by the hair, yanked back his head and exposed his throat. His smile revealed the glisten of ivory fangs...

Nicholas' eyes widened with appall and he struggled to push free. "You wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't I?" LaCroix chuckled deep in his throat. "You are *mine*," he breathed, leaned near...

"No!"

...And sank his fangs into the alabaster flesh...

OOOOO

Alone.

Weakened, Nicholas staggered to the tree and collapsed against it. His cheek crushed against the bark, he fought to control the trembling of his limbs, the revulsion twisting his stomach into knots. Rage threatened to tear free from his lungs and shatter the silence of the night...

"*You had no right!*"

He sank to the ground; his cheek left a trail of scarlet along the bark in its wake. He curled into himself and fought the demons vying for his sanity. He shuddered and withdrew into a darkened corner of his mind. Choked back a sob. Touched his hand to the dampness of his cheek...

Moonlight caught the crimson glistening in his palm.

OOOOO

"Something's happened!"

The cluster of brightly-clad young men huddled on the steps of St. Mark's, beneath the majesty of its columns upon the portico.

"Giovan, come quickly, something's wrong." Mario's voice echoed across the *piazza.*

Giovan raced toward the group, pushed past the huddle...

A feathered cap lay upon the steps, its brilliant yellow splattered crimson.

OOOOO

The palazzo del Fiore towered in the distance beyond the glistening fountains and the manicured lawns. The scent of roses lingered on the night breeze that rustled past...

Draped in a cape of royal purple that Nicholas had never seen before, Montague stared toward the mansion. Starlight caught the alabaster white of his skin, the unnatural intensity of his violet eyes, brilliant beneath the light. The wind tousled his hair, lifted the locks from his pale brow as he stared with silent longing toward a deserted balcony, the candlelight that flickered beyond the curtains.

"You can have her, Montague. You no longer require any man's consent."

"And condemn her to...this." The words ripped from his lips. "Never. She's resigned herself to her betrothal, and there's the baby to consider. Francisco has selected another more suitable husband, and I wish her all the richness of life I can no longer grant. Marriage. Children. She deserves these things. The man's a mouse, but rumor has it, his loins are more than adequate for the task. He can offer her the family she so greatly desires. I give the mouse three months before Antonia's running things again."

A smile whispered over Nicholas' lips. "Two months."

Montague laughed softly, it was captured by the breeze and carried into the night. "I resented her head-strong nature, but now there's solace in the knowledge that Antonia will go to her grave watching over my Bianca."

"Without doubt."

"Perhaps one day I'll pass this way and pause to watch her children at play in the giardino..." His voice fell away and he softly breathed, "Perhaps not."

The candlelight beyond the curtains of the balcony flickered into darkness.

"I must go...he's waiting." Montague sighed and turned to leave; his velvet cape fluttered in the breeze. "Niccolo, there's but one thing I wish you'd told me." He paused and caught his companion's eye.

"What's that, my friend?"

"Tears are crimson when we weep."

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